

Where do counselling psychologists based in the UK disseminate their research? A systematic review

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Aim: Research is frequently cited as core to counselling psychology. Yet we know little about where counselling psychologists publish their own findings. The present study aims to answer the following two research questions: (1) Where do UK-based counselling psychologists disseminate their research? (2) To what extent do counselling psychologists disseminate their research in British Psychological Society outlets?

Method: A systematic review examining research by UK-based counselling psychologists published in journals directly relevant to counselling psychology between January 2010 and December 2012. Counselling psychologists' individual publication lists were examined for research disseminated in additional specialist journals. Finally, two case studies of research active counselling psychologists were completed to gain a qualitative picture of counselling psychology dissemination.

Results: The review elicited 43 research articles by UK-based counselling psychologists in the last three years. Publication lists uncovered a further 24 research studies from specialist journals, making a total of 67 studies, completed by 40 counselling psychologists. The majority of articles were in *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research and Counselling Psychology Review*. The case studies both demonstrated the importance of overall attitudes towards research to dissemination.

Conclusion: Although the aim of the present study was to gain a picture of where counselling psychology research is disseminated, the limited volume of research seems to lead inevitably back to the debate on what the future of research in counselling psychology should look like, with mixed views on its importance for the field.

Keywords: Counselling psychology; research; research dissemination; professional identity; systematic review.

Research and counselling psychology

IN ITS SHORT LIFETIME within the UK, the identity of the counselling psychologist has been the subject of continual analysis (e.g. McAteer, 2010; Spinelli, 2001). Nonetheless, the 'homebase' that we can return to is outlined in the Division of Counselling Psychology professional guidelines. Here we are reminded that counselling psychology brings together the 'scientific demand for rigorous empirical enquiry with a firm value base grounded in the primacy of the counselling or psychotherapeutic relationship' (Division of Counselling Psychology, 2005, p.1). It seems clear from this point that research is an essential component of the

profession. The present emphasis on research is manifest in a number of ways. Counselling psychology is attributed the explicit model of the scientist-practitioner. This model is championed as the cornerstone of counselling psychology (e.g. Rafalin, 2010) and implies that practitioners should both be able to conduct research and maintain a research orientation in their practice (Belar & Perry, 1992; Hanley, Cutts & Scott, 2012). Further to this, since 2009 new entrants to the field have been required to complete a professional doctorate and therefore a piece of doctoral-level research.

Research complexities

Despite these facets the counselling psychology relationship with research remains complex (Rafalin, 2010). Although many therapeutic models are borne out of research, there remains a long-lasting disjuncture between research and practice (Castonguay, 2011). Research is often a source of anxiety or ambivalence for practitioners (Moran, 2011). The relationship between the two has been described as hostile (Henton, 2012), or even as a war (Tavris, 2003).

Now though, the light is shining on research more brightly than ever before. The relationship between research and therapeutic practice is under pressure as, increasingly, 'professional accountability and regulation demand a research evidence base to underpin safe and effective practice' (Moran, 2011, p.171). This is clearly manifest in the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme, in its inclusion of therapies that are classed as evidence-based by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (Department of Health, 2010). The implications of such a research-driven approach raises even deeper questions for counselling psychologists' relationship to research (see Hanley et al., 2013).

Research dissemination

Kasket (2011, p.2) highlights the importance of 'producing knowledge that practitioners can readily use'. Accessibility to new findings and debates is key to enabling the integration of research into practice. This brings us to what exactly we mean by research dissemination, described by Kerner and Hall (2009, p.520) as 'the proactive process by which information gleaned from science is actively communicated to those audiences who are thought to most likely benefit from this information'. There are a number of forums in which counselling psychology research can be actively communicated to its audiences; books, journals, conferences, workshops, websites. These forums should be

considered within the particular context that counselling psychology operates in. Counselling psychology is a global field. The longest established community is that of the US (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008), and this is perhaps manifest in the fact it has two of its own highly esteemed journals; the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and *The Counseling Psychologist*. Not all journals are regarded as being of equal quality, and impact factor – a measure based on the number of its citations, is becoming increasingly important in this evaluation. Both the US journals have impact factors, at 3.228 and 1.821 respectively, and are outlets that researchers often aspire to publish in.

The focus of the present study is the dissemination of research by UK-based counselling psychologists. In terms of the UK context, unlike other significantly sized divisions of applied psychologists, there is no *British Journal of Counselling Psychology* within the British Psychological Society (BPS) (see Hanley, 2010, for a discussion of this). This lack of an explicitly natural home within the learned society for such professionals therefore potentially adds to the complexity of outlets in which counselling psychologists can share their findings. Here some outlets are hosted by the BPS, some are not. Some contain purely counselling psychology research, and some are much wider. Currently, however, there is no objective, accurate picture of where practitioners disseminate their research, and to what extent particular outlets are used

This study

As noted above, there are a myriad of ways in which counselling psychologists can disseminate their research findings. The present study focused particularly on research journals. The research question is 'Where do UK-based counselling psychologists disseminate their research?' A secondary research question is 'To what extent do counselling psychologists disseminate their research in BPS outlets?'

Methodology

This is a mixed methods study, specifically a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2003). The design, therefore, constituted an initial focus on the collection and analysis of quantitative data, before moving to the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The results of the two – in this case the review and the case studies – are then brought together. The individual stages are explained in more detail below.

Stage 1

This consisted of a systematic review of research conducted by counselling psychologists in BPS and other peer-reviewed journals relevant to counselling psychology.

Inclusion criteria

The journals were examined for research published by UK-based counselling psychologists in the last three years (January 2010 to December 2012). Counselling psychologists had to be qualified, counselling psychologists as verified by the HCPC register available at www.hcpc-uk.org. The journals analysed comprised the full list of BPS

journals, as well as *Counselling Psychology Review*. Non-BPS journals had to have the primary topic of counselling psychology or counselling (see Box 1).

Stage 2

To identify additional specialist journals that counselling psychologists may have published in, psychologists attached to UK doctoral courses were contacted for up to date publications lists. If an up-to-date list was not received, the researcher used the publication list on the individual's university public profile where available.

Stage 3

In addition to this quantitative part of the review, brief semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with counselling psychologists who emerged as active researchers. These interviews focused upon the individuals experiences of engaging with research activities. Salient points were then summarised from the interviews into brief vignettes, which were sent to the participants for member checks (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999). Once the participants

Box 1: Journals examined for research by counselling psychologists.

BPS Journals:

British Journal of Psychology
British Journal of Clinical Psychology
British Journal of Developmental Psychology
British Journal of Educational Psychology
British Journal of Health Psychology
British Journal of Social Psychology
Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice
British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology
Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology
Legal and Criminological Psychology
Journal of Neuropsychology
Counselling Psychology Review

Non-BPS Journals:

Counselling Psychology Quarterly
The Counseling Psychologist
Journal of Counseling Psychology
Counselling and Psychotherapy Research Journal
Psychotherapy Research, Professional Psychology: Research and Practice
Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research
Psychology and psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice
European Journal of Counselling & Psychotherapy

confirmed that they were happy with the content of their summaries these were included. The results of these can be found in Boxes 2 and 3 found throughout the article. These provide a qualitative description of how counselling psychologists' have experienced disseminating their research.

Data analysis

The data from Stage 1 and Stage 2 were subjected to descriptive analyses. Totals for each journal were calculated, as was the mode number of articles per counselling psychologist. The analysis in Stage 3

consisted of summarising the salient points from the interviews, then sending the case study to the participants for member checking.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the School of Education at the University of Manchester. Stage 1 involved information which is already in the public domain. The case studies were completed following the BPS *Code of Human Research Ethics* (BPS, 2011). The interviews were undertaken with the permission of the participants.

Table 1: Counselling psychologist research studies by journal 2010–2012.

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Number of research articles</i>
BPS publications	
<i>British Journal of Psychology</i>	0
<i>British Journal of Clinical Psychology</i>	0
<i>British Journal of Developmental Psychology</i>	0
<i>British Journal of Educational Psychology</i>	0
<i>British Journal of Health Psychology</i>	0
<i>British Journal of Social Psychology</i>	0
<i>Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice</i>	1
<i>British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology</i>	0
<i>Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology</i>	0
<i>Legal and Criminological Psychology</i>	0
<i>Journal of Neuropsychology</i>	0
<i>Counselling Psychology Review</i>	12
Non-BPS publications	
<i>The Counseling Psychologist</i>	0
<i>Counselling Psychology Quarterly</i>	3
<i>Counselling and Psychotherapy Research Journal</i>	16
<i>Journal of Counselling Psychology</i>	0
<i>Psychotherapy Research</i>	3
<i>Professional Psychology: Research and Practice</i>	0
<i>European Journal of Counselling & Psychotherapy</i>	7
Total	43

Results

Stage 1 of the study elicited 43 research articles by UK-based counselling psychologists produced between January 2010 and December 2012 (see Table 1). These were split between 36 counselling psychologists. The mode number of studies per counselling psychologist was one; however one psychologist had contributed to eight studies. The majority of articles were in *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research Journal* and *Counselling Psychology Review*, at 16 and 12 respectively. 13 studies were in BPS publications; apart from one article in *Psychology and Psychotherapy:*

Theory, Research and Practice these were all in *Counselling Psychology Review*. There were no research articles by counselling psychologists in any of the other BPS publications. Of the non-BPS publications, the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research Journal* had the most studies, at 16. There were no articles in either of the two American counselling psychology publications; *The Counseling Psychologist* and *The Journal of Counseling Psychology*.

From the additional search of 37 academic counselling psychologists' publications lists, research journals were found in 17 additional specialist journals (see Table 2).

Table 2: Additional publication outlets elicited from Publication Lists.

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Number of research articles</i>
<i>Journal of Forensic Practice</i>	1
<i>Journal of Health Psychology</i>	1
<i>Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health</i>	1
<i>British Journal of Guidance & Counselling</i>	4
<i>Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies</i>	2
<i>Journal of Humanistic Psychology</i>	1
<i>Pastoral Care in Education: An International Journal of Personal, Social and Emotional Development</i>	1
<i>The Journal for Reproductive and Infant Psychology</i>	1
<i>Bereavement Care</i>	1
<i>European Journal of Psychotraumatology</i>	1
<i>School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation</i>	1
<i>Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology</i>	1
<i>Existential Analysis</i>	2
<i>Primary Healthcare Research and Development</i>	1
<i>Journal of Social Work Practice</i>	1
<i>Psychosis</i>	1
<i>Psychology Learning and Teaching</i>	1
Total	23

These were conducted by 11 counselling psychologists, of which five were not authors of studies in the first part of the review. In total, therefore, the review elicited a total of 67 research studies completed in the last three years, produced by 40 counselling psychologists.

Below are the two case study vignettes.

Box 2: Case Study 1.

Mick Cooper

Professor of Counselling, Co-director of the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of Strathclyde/Glasgow Caledonian University

'For me, I start thinking about dissemination from the outset of the research process in terms of how I might get the work published. Around half-way through – normally at the analysis stage, I start to think more specifically about the specific journal outlet. This would be determined by the quality of the work, the audience that I think the research would be best suited to, the research method, sample size and the rigour of the analysis. If I feel these factors are of a high standard, I will aim to publish in the larger, international APA journals. Key to this though is tailoring the paper to the expectations of that particular journal. In terms of BPS publications, it would tend to be *Counselling Psychology Review* or *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory Research and Practice* that I would aim for. I do feel it would be beneficial for the counselling psychology field to have its own journal of evidence-based, peer-reviewed research.

My personal journey has developed from focusing on books and professional articles to focusing on dissemination outlets which are eligible for publication in the REF (Research Excellence Framework) – basically journals, and particularly big impact journals.

As for counselling psychology in the UK more generally, I feel research dissemination has been somewhat neglected, especially compared to say clinical psychology or counselling psychology in the US. There is just not the tradition of publishing research. Underlying this, of course, is the issue of research production itself. Without this I do believe the credibility of the profession is threatened. We need to be producing research so that we have an evidence base for how we work. One way that we could be doing this is by working with trainee counselling psychologists who are producing doctoral research. If academics have established research programmes in particular areas that students can get involved with, the resulting research could be very beneficial to the field. At Strathclyde, we have set up a joint research programme with those at UWE and the Metanoia Institute to evaluate the effectiveness of pluralistic therapy for people with depression, and doctoral students have got involved with this project – both as researchers and as practitioners. It is this sort of synergy that I believe would put the counselling psychology field in a much healthier, stronger position.'

Box 3: Case Study 2.

Dr Jacqui Farrants

Consultant Psychologist, City University

'My involvement with research is usually as supervisor of doctoral students. As part of this role I work with students to help decide where to publish. This normally happens once they have finished their thesis and viva. When it comes to deciding which journals they are going to aim for, the main factors that we consider are readership and impact factor. Sadly this means we first aim for other journals above *Counselling Psychology Review*! We also consider the research design as many of the students here produce qualitative research, which only certain journals seem to be amenable to, such as the *British Journal of Health Psychology*, and the obvious in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Sometimes students might divide up their work to produce several follow up articles. Normally if they have more of an opinion piece than this is something they might produce for *Counselling Psychology Review*.

My feelings towards dissemination are mixed. Positive experiences have been students presenting at conferences, which they have been very good at. However when it comes to journals sometimes students have got work published fairly easily, and some we have really struggled with. And I still don't feel clear why that is. It does seem a shame when my students are producing what feels to me very interesting research.

I think the elephant in the room here is whether any research that is published is actually read and used to guide counselling psychologists in their practice. For the students themselves it is beneficial to get published, as well as respectful to their participants. However, overall I question how much impact the research has, both within and beyond the immediate readership. In some ways I believe this is the nature of the field we are in, there aren't the obvious breakthroughs you get in, for example, the medical profession. But I also don't think we can ignore that many people don't get into counselling to do research, but rather to do therapy. This may change as the percentage of people who have had to do doctoral level training increases, but for the moment any conversation about research seems to come back to this issue, as well as the difficulties those in full time practitioner roles have in doing research as well as their 'day job'.

Discussion

The review has given us a much clearer picture of where counselling psychologists disseminate their work. In the last three years research by UK-based counselling psychologists was published overwhelmingly in *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* and *Counselling Psychology Review*. *Counselling Psychology Review* and *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* were the only BPS publications that the research was featured in. The case studies provide a further insight into the range of issues that are involved in disseminating research. However, the overall low volume of research takes away somewhat from the discussion on where the research is disseminated. Below some of the key issues identified by the work are explored.

Low volume of research

A key finding that cannot be ignored is the overall low amount of research produced by counselling psychologists. The most recent BPS annual report (BPS, 2011) showed the Division of Counselling Psychology had 2892 members. The present study identified that 40 counselling psychologists had published research, this means that just 1.4 per cent of psychologists published research in the last three years. Further to this, both psychologists identified as active researchers for the case studies expressed their surprise as being selected as they did not feel they had produced much research. Of course, the findings must be considered with the caveat that there are likely to be other psychologists not found with the research design used in

the current study. For instance, not all counselling psychologists undertaking research in the UK are found in academic institutions offering Doctorate in Counselling Psychology programmes and it would not prove practically possible to explore all academic journals. Nonetheless it makes for a fairly shocking statistic. As discussed above, the scientist-practitioner model is something that is frequently identified as an important part of the identity of the counselling psychologist (e.g. Rafalin, 2010) and more than this, forms part of the regulatory body's Standards of Proficiency as a requirement that to be combined with the reflexive-practitioner model (HCPC, 2012). The finding must therefore raise questions for either what it means to be a scientist-practitioner or what it means to be a counselling psychologist.

The findings are perhaps not surprising given previous literature on research, from the wider counselling field as well as counselling psychology specifically. As noted in the introduction, many (e.g. Castonguay, 2011) have argued that there is a historical distance between research and practice in the general field of counselling and psychotherapy. Moran (2011) established that most trainees wanted clinical rather than research careers, something echoed by Jackie Farrants in Case Study 2. Doctoral students cited largely negative feelings towards research, seeing it as 'intimidating' and 'anxiety provoking' (p.174). Moran's (2011) research focused on student attitudes to research; however, it seems an obvious jump that this easily translates into not producing research on qualification once it is often no longer a requirement. Indeed, this has been the finding in similar studies of clinical psychologists (e.g. Milne, Britton & Wilkinson, 1990; Milne et al., 2000) which found that in the UK National Health Service (NHS) at least, very few clinical psychologists produced research beyond qualification.

Research by trainees

A slightly distinct point is what happens to the research that is produced by trainees. There are presently 13 doctoral programmes in counselling psychology. Cumulatively this equates to hundreds of trainees completing research projects. This again, therefore, raises the question of where this research is going and if it is not going anywhere, can ethical questions about the research be raised? (Hanley, Lennie & West, 2013). The current study established research by counselling psychologists by checking against the HCPC register so if research had been published by students, or graduates not yet on the register this would not have been included in the findings unless the research supervisor(s) names (who were registered counselling psychologists) were also aligned to the project.

Looking at previous literature it seems likely that this research is simply not being disseminated. Hanley, Cutts and Scott (2012) suggested four reasons that may prevent students' research from being disseminated; completing poor quality work, time, ignorance/inexperience and finally lack of support from the research supervisor. They argued particularly that the focus the trainer places upon publication is crucial in influencing whether the research sees the light of day or not. This is something that was again echoed by Mick Cooper in his argument for students' research to feed into more structured programmes of research. Yet this view does not take into account the students attitudes towards research, as discussed above. In a study by Widdowson (2012), psychotherapy trainees echoed Morrow-Bradley and Elliott's view that having competing demands on their time limited their motivation to engage in research. Students in this study did however wish to develop their 'research competence' (p.184).

Dissemination in BPS outlets

The next few sections focus back on the dissemination patterns that were uncovered by the present study. A large proportion of counselling psychologists' research was published in *Counselling Psychology Review*, a BPS membership publication for the Division of Counselling Psychology. However, aside from this, there was only one other article published in a BPS outlet; *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory Research and Practice*. With only this number in BPS publications, much of the research was instead published in counselling rather than psychology-based outlets such as the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research Journal*, a publication affiliated with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, and the *European Journal of Counselling & Psychotherapy*. It is not clear why so little work is published in BPS outlets. It should be noted that the present study would not have captured where psychologists had attempted to publish in these outlets and not been successful. Although there is great individual variation from study to study, the finding does raise questions about where the home for counselling psychology research really lies.

Theoretical versus research

It is worth remembering that some of the articles found in the review did not meet the criteria of the current study because either they were theoretical as opposed to research papers. A content analysis of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (Buboltz, Deemer & Hoffman, 2010) showed that theoretical articles made up only four per cent of the total articles between 1999 and 2009. Although a formal count of the number of theoretical articles did not form part of the present study, it was clear that the proportion was much greater than this. A quick scan of the four editions of *Counselling Psychology Review* from 2012 revealed 10 research papers versus nine theoretical papers. The count did not include any of the competition papers nor more opinion focused articles.

International issues

The study did not capture any research publications by UK-based counselling psychologists in the US journals of counselling psychology (*The Counseling Psychologist* and the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*). The vast majority of the US outlets contained content by US psychologists. In a content analysis of *The Journal of Counselling Psychology* by Buboltz et al. (2010), the top 20 ranking research institutions were all within the US, and although the review commented on the increase in number of papers addressing multiculturalism and diversity, there was no mention at all of international contributors in the analysis. This was in contrast to the high volume of international contributions to the UK journals. This has to raise a question mark over the impact that the UK counselling psychology field has at an international level, if this is something that we do want to impact upon.

Limitations

As always, the study has its limitations. The focus of the quantitative part of the review was largely research journals, however as noted in the introduction there are many other forums through which counselling psychologists can and do disseminate their research. Furthermore within that focus, only a select number of journals were examined. The publication lists broadened this lists, however, it should be noted that there may be psychologists who are not attached to an academic institution, or more recent publication lists that would have given me access to further publications.

What next?

We now have a clearer picture of where counselling psychologists publish their research, to what extent they use BPS outlets, and what sort of factors influence where researchers try to publish. The picture, therefore, provides a yardstick from which to gauge developments in the future. However, the overall lack of research does mean that the discussion around where research is

disseminated somewhat limited. The case studies also came back to the underlying issue of research production. Discussions about what next then inevitably lead to what can be done to address the issue of production. Mick Cooper, in Case Study 1, pointed to the establishment of more strategic research programmes in universities to strengthen trainee research. Yet Jackie Farrants, in Case Study 2, reminded us of the difficulties for practitioners not attached to universities of incorporating research into their lives as counselling psychologists. If we do aspire to have more impact in the research community we need to be more visible and this may involve adopting a more strategic approach. Practice Research Networks (PRNs) are increasingly picking up momentum in the current discourse (e.g. Henton, 2012), which have been implemented with success in the US. Either way it is clear there is currently a large disjuncture between official identity of counselling psychologists as scientist-practitioners, and what really happens on the ground.

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