Becoming research practitioners: freedom and values

Fiona Gardner, **Steven J Coombs** and **Amanda Larcombe** reflect on the opportunities

IMAGES.COM/ALAMY

There are good reasons why it has become important for us to 'go public' about counselling in general but particularly counselling in workplace settings. By 'going public' we mean talking about, writing and researching the work that we do and thereby sharing valuable practitioner knowledge with the public.

When we open up the private world of counselling there are potentially long-term positive implications for the profession. First, it is good that people understand counselling beyond cliché-ridden stereotypes. Second, it is useful to reflect on the outcome and success of counselling, and learn from one another about what worked and why, and, of course, what did not. At a pragmatic level, publicly researching our work and writing about it can help contribute to funding the profession or a particular project or scheme. It also provides a wealth of rich and new practitioner evidence that contributes to an expanding professional learning knowledge base. So it really matters that we adopt a new 'value' with a rationale for why we choose to open our work for scrutiny and evaluation. This new value provides an insight into the purpose and benefit of practitioner research in order to achieve a greater depth of understanding of the value of therapeutic work and the associated professional learning knowledge base. It matters how we present to the outside world the successes and the less successful aspects of therapeutic work, and the good and healing work we do.

When we write about any therapeutic work, especially one-to-one work, we are opening the door to what has been a private space and we are inviting the reader or listener inside to see what has been happening. There are, of course, immediate ethical implications for the people we see, so it matters how and why and where and for whom we write about our work. It matters to the person we are seeing what we say about them (whether they read it or not) and it matters to us how we describe or understand the work we do. There are also considerations about confidentiality, integrity

Fiona Gardner is an author, psychotherapist and award leader for the professional Master's in counselling and psychotherapy practice at Bath Spa University.
fgardner@tiscali.co.uk

Steven J Coombs is head of department for continuing professional development, teaching fellow and Chair of the professional Master's programme at Bath Spa University.
S.coombs@bathspa.ac.uk

Amanda Larcombe is a BACP accredited counsellor. She is director and co-founder of Optima Workplace Ltd, a supplier of counselling, coaching and training to businesses in the South-West.
mandy@optimaworkplace.com
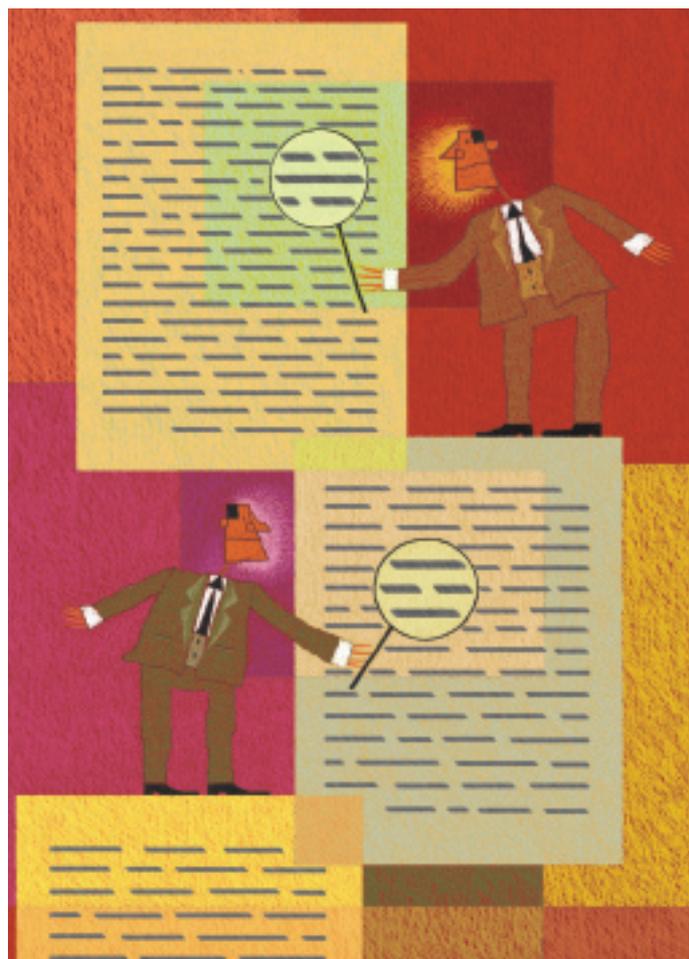
> '**Critically appraising our work and challenging our assumptions is a positive part of practitioner research and a powerful form of continuing professional development**'

and trust, and aspects of transference to be considered – whether recognised or not within the work setting.

Outside the counselling space there are clear demands from government and funding bodies that the outcome of our work is made public, as well as it resulting in some form of positive impact. In this age of monitoring, evaluation and evidence-based practice, we need to become responsible and skilled advocates for counselling practice in a variety of professional settings. The contemporary context demands that we explain ourselves to others, and it also demands that the work is professional and 'justified'. This may not

www.bacpworkplace.org.uk

be easy and, indeed, we may be indignant or resistant to this sort of request, but the Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) campaign[1] has seriously challenged the counselling and psychotherapy profession for its reluctance to engage in research. This research evidence will come from our professional experience in the workplace and our ability to perform as research practitioners: it will enable us to describe professional learning and share knowledge.

How we turn our clinical experience into a useful, accessible and on the whole accurate account, is in part a learned skill. In other words, there is guidance and advice that can be given, and there are some techniques we can learn to use that do not compromise the integrity of what has been a private and largely inter-subjective encounter. A central skill is learning to become in part an observer and looking with an objective part of ourselves at the work. We may have to learn the value of presenting material in an open and unambiguous way, letting go of unnecessary jargon and the tendency to hide behind the predictable phrases. We may also have to learn to view our work through the eyes not only of a supervisor or assessor, but, if we publish, through the eyes of an unknown reader. Learning how to write and research our work brings reasoning and evidence into what previously may have been rather too glib assumptions. It is a way of learning to get behind our assumptions and the use of convention. We have to learn how to critically evaluate our own work and the work of others. Critically appraising our work and challenging our assumptions is a positive part of practitioner research and a powerful form of continuing professional development (CPD).

The techniques we can learn include different skills linked to writing up work and assignments as part of training courses. If we are thinking of researching our work, a hybrid and multi-method approach can be used and this allows the research framework to be adjusted to fit the particulars of the counselling context rather than counselling research being forced to apologetically and uncomfortably fit into some quasi-scientific model. In other words, counselling research practitioners can now come of age and freely choose, with confidence and understanding, what is appropriate for their particular research focus.

Case studies

To illustrate this way of thinking we will briefly describe some key aspects that emerged during two of the four research studies highlighted in our recent book[2]. The first was undertaken by Amanda Larcombe in a large public sector organisation.

Once underway, she found that the research process was not without event! Interestingly, in response to the needs of the organisation, the research question had to be changed five times in the course of roughly an 18-month period, including at one stage the organisation wanting to pull out completely. It was only through negotiation, determination and adaptation that the project was completed at all. From this experience Larcombe has been able to share useful guidance for anyone considering counselling research in a similar setting. This includes advice on how to juggle expectations and how to work out and fully appreciate where the power to influence such a research project lies. The reason for detailing this aspect of authentic research environments (not usually covered in more academic books and articles) is to highlight the fact that once research is set up, expectations exist that need to be *actively* managed – something that the researcher found could be achieved by identifying and including the research stakeholders in the *design process* and thereafter to its completion. She suggests from her experiences that if this does not happen, unmanaged expectations are liable to sabotage the research process. Her experience also showed that if a public organisation chooses to take part in field research then they are doing so for a reason. Whether this is implicit or explicit, there is usually an agenda. The challenge for the researcher is to find out what this is and to see if it matches their own research expectations. The challenge is extended when we realise there is more than one stakeholder with expectations to manage. What becomes apparent is that, in this particular workplace context, the researcher has little, if any, power over whether the research takes place at all. What counts is the influence and motivation of the key stakeholders and how this might be tapped for mutual benefit. In order to succeed, authentic research projects require a detailed needs analysis and identification of the key player stakeholders.

Developing this opportunity to conduct research depends on the researcher's contact and networking skills to conduct such a needs analysis. This has to happen with a willing public sector organisation, other associated stakeholders, and indeed with the influence and enthusiasm of the researcher's supervisor. Clearly there is no shortage of opportunity for research practitioners to demonstrate their counselling skills, diplomacy and acumen in order to negotiate a mutually accepted research project. This may include:
■ understanding the organisation's structure and respecting the associated hierarchies or chains of command
■ establishing exactly what style and content is required in the application
■ doing the research when the subject is relevant to the organisation (ie politically/financially) so that the organisation consciously needs and wants it.

Larcombe[3] found that maintaining some form of independence was crucial. 'Contact with the organisation and its employees revealed the presence of a general attitude of suspicion and distrust among employees of any research that was overtly sponsored by the organisation, particularly if it was associated with them as individuals. Though this may not be unique to the public sector, it is most definitely not an uncommon situation. To develop trust and reduce the potentially negative impact of this element of organisational culture, you as the researcher may need to consciously distance yourself from the organisation; remain "self-funded" and make clear in all communications that the research is being conducted "independently".'

In such settings it is even more crucial that the ethical design incorporates high levels of confidentiality and that a transparent process is used to develop trust in the researcher and the research process. This research included quantitative and qualitative data – the former satisfied the public sector organisation that wanted to monitor and reflect on its performance in providing staff counselling; the qualitative data provided the depth of findings the researcher was seeking.

In contrast, the second research study was undertaken in the voluntary sector. It involved a small number of in-depth interviews with colleagues about their motivations to become therapeutic counsellors. In her study, Marilyn Barnett[4] raises the subtleties of what it means to research one's peers and colleagues, and all the ethical and emotional implications known so well to counsellors. Using her own skills as a psychodynamic therapist, but honed and framed within her role as research practitioner, Barnett reminds us that as counsellors we, in a sense, are undertaking research in every session and with every client. Our knowledge and understanding is constructed through exploration, observation, reflection and trial interpretation. But alongside such clinical competence there is a need as research practitioners for self-discipline and organisational skills, an interest in language and a desire to write. Some of the issues and advice from this research study include the desirability of congruence between one's chosen method of research and the way one practises, and 'the need for reflexivity, awareness and flexibility on the part of the qualitative researcher'[4].

The future of workplace research

Research may prove increasingly necessary in the future, given the ongoing wider political implications of formal regulation for this and many other helping professions. This 'postgraduatisation' of professions is apparent in all occupational sectors of professional working life. It is particularly true not only for counselling and psychotherapy but also in caring and helping professions where children and young adults are referred to as the children's workforce[5] and all teachers will be expected to gain an on-the-job Masters in teaching and learning. Similar expectations for social workers and other professional groups will no doubt emerge from this agenda that considers inter-professionalism, achieved through work-based learning, accredited CPD, essential for children's wellbeing. The children's workforce professional qualifications[6] will be part of an Integrated Qualifications Framework (IQF) that will be linked to the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) during 2010[7]. It is assumed that many of these IQF qualifications will be achieved through work-based learning and practitioner research CPD. It is our understanding that counsellors and professional counselling qualifications will fall within the aegis and professional learning assumptions of the IQF and EQF.

Developing practitioner research in the workplace leads to self-discovery and also has a wider impact in terms of acquiring on-the-job CPD qualifications and an overall deepening of the knowledge base of the profession. Despite the impending professional trends and obligations of registration and accreditation, it is something positive that we would encourage all counsellors to try. Developing our freedom to research is not only emancipatory but forms a core part of our values. ■

References

1 Department of Health. Improving access to psychological therapies (IAPT). 2008. http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_084065

2 Gardner F, Coombs SJ. (eds) Researching, reflecting and writing about work. London and New York: Routledge; 2009.

3 Larcombe A. Research in the public sector. In: Gardner F, Coombs SJ. (eds) Researching, reflecting and writing about work. London and New York: Routledge; 2009.

4 Barnett, M. Research in the voluntary sector. In: Gardner F, Coombs SJ. (eds) Researching, reflecting and writing about work. London and New York: Routledge; 2009.

5 DCSF. The Children's Plan. 2007. http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/childrensplan/

6 Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). 2006. http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/

7 European Union European Qualifications Framework. 2008. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm