

# 1

## Why research is important

There are many myths and fantasies about research. These often include vivid images of white coats and laboratories. People with practical skills and competencies may believe that research is something that is 'beyond' them. A very prevalent myth in the therapy world is that research is about numbers, impenetrable statistics and large samples and has no place for ordinary human feelings and experiences. Another myth is that research necessarily ignores the uniqueness of the individual. It can be hard for some therapists to identify with the role of being a researcher. The researcher is someone who is an expert, who knows. Running through these images and fantasies is a sense of research as another world, a kind of parallel universe that takes what is happening in the real world and processes it through computers.

These myths, perhaps stated here in an exaggerated form, act as a barrier that stops therapists from becoming engaged in research and making use of research-based knowledge to enrich their practice. A more constructive point of view is to start from the acknowledgement that we do 'research' all the time. Each of us has a model or map of the world, and is continually seeking new evidence with which to verify or alter that model. A therapy session with a client can be seen as a piece of research, a piecing together of information and understandings, followed by testing the validity of conclusions and actions based on that shared knowing. Over dozens of clients and hundreds of sessions we build up our own theories of what different types of client are like and what is effective with them. These personal theories almost always have some connection to 'official' theories, but retain an idiosyncratic element originating in the unique experiences of the individual therapist.

The aim of this book is to de-mystify research, to puncture these myths and to position research as a friend, a familiar and well-understood dimension of everyday practice. In this chapter, a pragmatic definition of

research is offered, and examples are provided of the some of the ways in which research knowledge and skills contribute to effective counselling and psychotherapy.

### Exercise 1.1 Images of research

Take a few moments to relax and centre yourself. When you are ready, reflect on the images, metaphors and fantasies that come to mind when you think about the idea of 'research'. You might find it helpful to imagine how you might complete statements such as:

- research is ...
- if a researcher was an animal, he or she might be a ...
- what I like/appreciate about therapy research is ...
- what I fear about therapy research is ...

Take a few minutes to note down (visually and/or in words) the images and metaphors that occur to you. What do these images tell you about such issues as:

- the role of research in our culture/society
- the reactions that clients and therapists might have if asked to take part in a research study
- your own barriers and motivators around learning more about research.

## A pragmatic definition of research

A useful working definition of research is: *a systematic process of critical inquiry leading to valid propositions and conclusions that are communicated to interested others*. Breaking this definition down into its component meanings allows some of the assumptions that lie behind it to be made explicit:

- 1 The concept of *critical inquiry*. Research grows out of the primary human tendency or need to learn, to know, to solve problems, to question received wisdom and taken-for-granted assumptions. These impulses are fundamentally *critical*; the need to know is the counterpoint to the sense that what is already known is not quite sufficient.
- 2 Research as a *process* of inquiry. Any research involves a series of steps or stages. Knowledge must be constructed, through a cyclical process of observation, reflection and acts of experimentation.
- 3 Research is *systematic*. There are two distinct sets of meanings associated with the notion that research should be systematic. The first is that any investigation takes place within a theoretical system of

concepts or constructs. A piece of research is embedded in a framework or way of seeing the world. Second, research involves the application of a method, which has been designed to achieve knowledge that is as valid and truthful as possible.

- 4 The products of research are *propositions* or statements. There is a distinction between research and learning. Experiential knowing, or 'knowing how', can be a valuable outcome of an inquiry process, but *research* always involves communication with others. Learning can occur at an individual, intuitive level, but research requires the symbolisation and transmission of these understandings in the public domain.
- 5 Research findings are judged according to criteria of *validity*, truthfulness or authenticity. To make a claim that a statement is based on research is to imply that it is in some way more valid or accurate than a statement based on personal opinion. However, every culture has its own distinctive criteria or 'logic of justification' for accepting a theory or statement as valid. For example, within mainstream psychology truth value is equated with statements based on rational, objective experimentation. In psychoanalysis, truth value is judged on the basis of clinical experience.
- 6 Research is *communicated to interested others*; it takes place within a research community. No single research study has much meaning in isolation. Research studies provide the individual pieces that fit together to create the complex mosaic of the *literature* on a topic. Research can be viewed as a form of *collective knowing* that reflects the best efforts of a community to arrive at some level of agreement about how best to proceed in relation to practical concerns.

This definition of research is intended to demonstrate that there are many ways of arriving at valid propositional knowledge in the field of therapy. The definition does not imply that research must be 'scientific', nor does it make assumptions about what constitutes science. In technologically advanced modern societies, it is all too readily assumed that 'research' equals 'science' and that scientific methods represent the only acceptable means of generating useful knowledge. A great deal of research into counselling and psychotherapy has followed this route, in taking for granted the rules and canons of scientific method and constructing therapy as a sub-branch of applied psychology or as a discipline allied to medicine. However, there are strong arguments in support of the position that therapy may be more appropriately regarded as an *interdisciplinary* activity, using concepts and methods from the arts and humanities, theology, philosophy and sociology as well as psychology and medicine. If this perspective is adopted, it is essential that research in counselling is defined in such a way as to give equal weight and legitimacy to methods of inquiry drawn from *all* of these disciplines.

Another feature of the definition of research being employed here is that research is not taken to be only studies that appear in academic journals. There exists a broad continuum of research activities that lead to a diversity of research *products*. At a very local level, a therapist may critically review his or her work with a particular set of clients and report back their conclusions to a peer supervision group. Also at a local level, a counselling agency may analyse data on clients and outcomes for inclusion in its Annual Report. By contrast, international collaborative studies may involve 'cutting edge' developments in theory and practice that are written up as highly technical research reports in academic journals. It is important to be aware that, in the wider scheme of things, relatively little research ever finds its way into academic journals. The majority of studies are disseminated as limited circulation reports and discussion papers, or are lodged in university and college libraries as student dissertations. Nevertheless, across this continuum of sophistication and ambition, all therapy researchers are faced with the same set of methodological and practical issues.

### Exercise 1.2 Research as conversation

Adopting a pragmatic definition implies that therapy research is not a matter of arriving at an ultimate truth in relation to a question or issue, but instead operates as a vehicle for an on-going conversation or dialogue around what is involved in making effective therapy available to different type of people with different types of problem. From this perspective, research functions as an anchor-point for these conversations, which in turn lead to further research that aims to deepen or extent the conversation. In this exercise, consider the question: 'What kinds of conversations are made possible for you (or might be made possible) through your knowledge of research?' These might be actual conversations with colleagues or clients, or imaginary conversations with people you have never met, such as Carl Rogers.

## Why is research important?

There are many reasons why research is important, and needs to be taken seriously by anyone working as a counsellor or psychotherapist. These reasons include:

- 1 *Gaining a wider perspective.* Counselling and psychotherapy are largely private activities, conducted alone in conditions of confidentiality. Research studies allow therapists to learn about and

from the work of their colleagues, and give the profession a means of pooling knowledge and experience on an international scale.

- 2 *Accountability.* There is a significant level of resourcing of counselling and psychotherapy from public finances, and this financial backing brings with it a responsibility to demonstrate the efficacy of what is being offered to clients. It does not convince the public at large for counsellors to assert that, in their personal experience, most clients gain a great deal from therapy. More rigorous, objective evidence is required. If counselling/psychotherapy is to maintain its good public image, and continue to attract funding from government agencies, health providers and employers, then effective, research-based systems of accountability are essential.
- 3 *Developing new ideas and approaches.* Counselling and psychotherapy are new, emerging professions, and innovations in theory and technique are springing up all the time. Until the 1930s, the only form of psychotherapy that existed was psychoanalysis. There are now dozens of well-established approaches. Counselling and psychotherapy are activities where innovative interventions are continually being generated by practitioners, which subsequently need to be evaluated through research. Given that there is evidence that therapeutic interventions can do harm as well as good (Lambert, 1989), an informed awareness of the value of research in checking the value of innovations is indispensable.
- 4 *Offering therapy to new client groups.* Running in parallel with the development of new techniques has been the opening up of new client groups, and areas for the application of counselling and psychotherapy. The relevance and effectiveness of existing models in these new contexts is an important topic for research.
- 5 *Personal and professional development.* One of the chief sources of job satisfaction experienced by many counsellors and psychotherapists is a sense of continually learning about human nature in response to the lives and personal worlds that clients allow them to enter. As part of this process, practitioners may find themselves with 'burning questions' that can only be answered by carrying out research. The professional and career development path taken by experienced therapists may lead many to seek to consolidate their professional identity by making a contribution to the research literature.
- 6 *The external credibility and legitimacy of counselling and psychotherapy as professional activities.* Like other human service professions such as medicine, nursing, clinical psychology, teaching and social work, there is an expectation that members of the counselling/psychotherapy profession will be able to offer a rational basis for their interventions through drawing on a research-based body of knowledge. This trend is reflected in the increasing movement toward university- and college-based training for these professions,

with significant emphasis in these courses on research awareness and skills.

- 7 *Using research tools and instruments to collect feedback on the progress of therapy.* There has been a movement in recent years to develop ways of using brief research questionnaires to collect feedback from clients on a regular basis, as a means of generating information that can provide both client and therapist a basis for reviewing the progress of therapy. This kind of data can also give therapists a better sense of their own effectiveness with different client groups, and can feed in to supervision and training.
- 8 *Becoming sensitised to the experiences and needs of clients.* The professional role and status of the therapist mean that he or she has a particular perspective on the therapy process. Research studies that focus on the experience of clients can serve as useful reminders that the client may have a different perspective on what is happening. In addition, research into experiences of specific problems and conditions can help to sensitise therapists to the needs of clients from these groups.

A fundamental theme running through these reasons for undertaking research is that the knowledge base for counselling and psychotherapy practice is not fixed, dogmatic and immutable. Although therapy theories may appear solid and immovable, the history of therapy reveals that pioneers such as Freud and Rogers had to struggle to get their ideas accepted in the face of what was the accepted wisdom of their time and place. And, inevitably, even the apparent certainties of psychodynamic or person-centred theory, or CBT, will in turn be modified and overthrown at some stage.

### *Exercise 1.3 Reflecting on your own personal engagement with research*

What is your own current involvement with therapy research? How many research papers do you read in a typical month? What areas of research are of particular interest to you? Do any of the list of reasons why research is important outlined above, encourage you to extend your involvement in therapy research?

## Conclusions

This chapter has introduced some of the key ideas that underpin the discussion of research that is offered in the rest of the book. The driving force of research is the area between knowing and not knowing. Something is known but it is not enough. Research that has

meaning takes off from the point of a personal felt sense of a need to know. Being research-informed is an essential component of all competent counselling and psychotherapy practice, because it is not possible to be a good therapist without possessing a spirit of openness to inquiry and learning. Good research in the domain of counselling and psychotherapy always exists in a dialogue with practice. Research is a collective activity. Each study draws on what has gone before, and its inevitable imperfections and inconclusiveness will be carried forward by someone yet to come. Research encompasses different ways of collecting and analysing data. The findings of research can be disseminated through different types of research 'product'. These ideas have the effect of de-mystifying research. Within the educational system, and our culture as a whole, there has existed a widely-held assumption that research is an elite activity, that is separate from everyday life, best reserved for brainy folk. This is not a helpful assumption. It is better to think about research as similar to cooking. Yes, some people are really good at it, and are an inspiration to the rest of us. But, in the end, we can all do it, because it is something that needs to be done.

The chapters that follow attempt to build an understanding of the scope and nature of contemporary research in counselling and psychotherapy. The next chapter offers an overview of therapy research, in the form of the story of how it has evolved and changed over the past century. There then follow a series of chapters that explore the engine of therapy research: the philosophical assumptions about knowledge that have influenced researchers, the practical challenges of doing research, how knowledge is organised into a 'literature', the nature of qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry. The focus then turns to how these ideas and techniques have played out in relation to the two big questions that have dominated the therapy research literature: 'Does it work?' (outcome research) and 'How does it work?' (process research). The closing chapter offers some reflections on what this all means, and where it is all going.

### Suggested further reading

Cooper, M. (2008). *Essential Research Findings in Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Facts Are Friendly*. London: Sage. (This book offers a unique, accessible, overview of the practical conclusions that can be drawn from research into all aspects of therapy.)

**Recommended resources**

Further information on any of the ideas that are introduced in the following chapters, can be found in two excellent therapy research methods textbooks:

Barker, C., Pistrang, N. and Elliott, R. (2002). *Research Methods in Clinical Psychology: An Introduction for Students and Practitioners*, 2nd edn. Chichester: Wiley.

Timulak, L. (2008). *Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. London: Sage.