

6

Encouraging Counsellors to Become Active Researchers and Users of Research

Robert Manthei

Abstract

According to the professional literature counsellors around the world do very little research, nor do they read or make use of the research that does exist. The same situation exists in New Zealand. Because of the many compelling ethical, economic and accountability-based reasons for doing and using research, this article makes a case for more counsellors to become research-active, and suggests how they might initiate that process. This paper is divided into two parts. The first reviews the relationship of counselling to counselling research in New Zealand. The second speaks to counsellors directly, encouraging them to take a broader and more realistic approach, and giving practical advice.

[Research] is not an alien activity that academics in laboratories immerse themselves in apart from the real world of mental health. It is a natural function of every clinician with an inquisitive mind. (Falvey, 1991, p. 233.)

Counseling research can be an exhilarating experience, analogous to adding pieces to a jigsaw puzzle. As counselors add to the knowledge base, the field has a more comprehensive view of the process of counseling. (Whiston, 1996, p. 622.)

Introduction

Most counsellor educators and practising counsellors would like to believe that their work is based on sound research evidence. Those paying for counselling – clients, government agencies, insurance companies – would also expect the services to be “evidence-based” (Goss & Rose, 2002; Whiston, 1996). Thus, every counsellor should use findings from current, well-conducted research to inform and guide their work with clients. Unfortunately, using research in this way is not at all common. In fact, the majority of mental health practitioners – social workers, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors – neither conduct research nor read research (Falvey, 1991; Sexton et al., 1997). Nor does it seem that research has much impact on counsellors’

practice (Cohen et al., 1986; Manthei & Miller, 1991; Sexton et al., 1997; Small, 1980) probably because counsellors do not see its relevance. It may also be the case that counsellor education programmes have tended to focus more on the learning of skills and the application of “expert opinion” to client problems, rather than on teaching counsellors to be critical readers and users of sound research, to do research themselves or to write for publication (Falvey, 1991; Gelso, 1993; Pistole & Roberts, 2002; Whiston, 1996).

This situation also exists among New Zealand counsellors, and counselling and clinical psychologists (Manthei & Stanley, 2004). Its effects can be seen in three areas: the lack of influence research has on current practice; the small proportion of practitioners as authors, and the relatively small number of articles reporting actual research data. In the first area, three reviews of published counselling, therapy and guidance literature originating in New Zealand have failed to provide any clear evidence that published research has markedly influenced therapeutic practices (Manthei & Miller, 1991, 2001; Small, 1980). Rather, all three reviews have suggested that outside events (political, economic, social) rather than published research have had greater influence in changing the practice of counselling and therapy.

In the second area, the same three reviews of therapy and guidance literature spanning almost 30 years have revealed that over time practitioners have, as a whole, become less active in writing material for publication in their professional journal, the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*. As far back as 1980 Small suggested that involving practitioners more actively in research on guidance and counselling matters was necessary if the “real” problems were to be identified. In the 1970s and 80s a comparatively healthy 52% of the 110 articles appearing in the *New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association Journal* (1976–1990) were authored by practitioners and, possibly, students enrolled in university-based counsellor education courses (Manthei, 1991). However, this proportion fell considerably during the 1990s, when an analysis of the contents of what had now become the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* covering the years 1991–2000 (Manthei, 2001) revealed that only 30% of 78 articles had been authored by practitioners. One reason for this marked decline was thought to be the huge increase in the number of counsellors in private practice and their need to generate income rather than spend time on “unproductive” tasks such as researching and writing for publication. The same holds true in the US, where most contributors to the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, for example, were academics, not practitioners (Pistole & Roberts, 2002).

However, a competing outlet for counsellors’ writings was developed during the 1990s in New Zealand. The *NZAC Newsletter* expanded and upgraded its contents

during the 1990s (Manthei, 2001) to the point that it appeared more regularly than the *Journal*, provided readers with more pages of reading per year, was more timely, and provided broader coverage (e.g., book reviews, professional association news, research reports, articles reprinted from other sources). In effect, the *Newsletter* may have become the preferred outlet for practitioners' writings, whereas academics, whose need to publish is more pressing and prescribed, may have focused on the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*.

In the third area, the percentage of journal articles reporting original data (collected by whatever method) has remained at a low, but fairly steady, level over the years. From a low of 27% reported in 1984 (Editor's Statement, 1984) it increased to 33.6% in 1991 (Manthei, 1991) and remained at 33% during the decade of the 1990s (Manthei, 2001). While most of this material was undoubtedly generated through the efforts of academics and their research students (Manthei, 2001) it was still thought to be insufficient in scope, variety and amount if local counselling contexts and practices were to be effectively scrutinised and evaluated.

One of the problems in New Zealand, and indeed worldwide, is the fact that there are few inducements for counselling practitioners to conduct research. Social workers are said to be in much the same situation (McKenzie, 1998). Counsellors are seldom rewarded or promoted for their research and writing activities. In fact, there may be disincentives for such activities. For example, employers may actively discourage their counselling staff from doing research because it is time-consuming, generates little or no income, and seldom leads to clear-cut policy or practice innovations (Pistole & Roberts, 2002). Similar reasons could apply to counsellors working in private practice (Manthei, 2001).

Why conduct research? Why bother reading it?

There are many reasons for doing research, and for reading it, ranging from the ethical to the economic, and even to the enhancement of one's creativity and self-esteem as a professional. Previous writers have already covered this ground (e.g., Goss & Rose, 2002; Sexton et al., 1997), which includes reasons of accountability, self-reflection to enhance one's practice, personal challenge and career enhancement, cultivating a critical state of mind, and adding to the general pool of knowledge and clinical practices.

As the cost of counselling rises, clients and funding bodies are demanding greater accountability and expecting services that accord with up-to-date research and "evidence-based practice" (Goss & Rose, 2002; Sexton et al., 1997), which is defined as the "conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individuals" (Sackett et al., 1996, p. 71). Thus, it is no longer good

enough merely to espouse the “art of counselling” position in explaining/defending one’s practices (Sexton et al., 1997), especially in the face of ethical requirements to offer demonstrated best practices and to do the client no harm (e.g., ACA Code of Ethics, <http://www.counseling.org>; BACP Code of Ethics, <http://bacp.co.uk>; NZAC Code of Ethics, <http://www.nzac.org.nz>). There are other, practical reasons to conduct research, such as the pressing need for a local, national literature which rigorously critiques practice and process, monitors one’s own practice and shares ideas with others (McKenzie, 1998). Finally, many people find researching and writing challenging, fun and rewarding. There is always a sense of accomplishment when you see your work in print.

In responding to the often dismissive attitude that practitioners have toward counselling research, Sexton et al. (1997) listed, and debunked, seven “myths”, including the view that research is largely irrelevant to practitioners (it isn’t; you can’t have relevance without rigour); research deals only with group differences and not individual circumstances (both group trends and individual idiosyncrasies are important, and methodological variety – using both quantitative *and* qualitative methods – is a way of achieving a useful balance); research does not “tell you what to do” (demanding prescriptive results from probability-based research misconstrues the nature of research and overlooks the often rich vein of practical implications embedded within).

Counselling and researching are said to involve parallel, not incompatible, processes: “Research and psychotherapy are conceptually and passionately similar endeavours. Both follow a decision-making process ... termed clinical judgement or scientific method.” (Falvey, 1989, p. 99). Learning to carry out research assists counsellors to develop this method of pragmatic, applied reasoning (Loughead et al., 1991). Thus, to be a professional, informed, ethical counsellor is to think and work like a researcher, and this includes keeping up with the literature by becoming regular and critical readers of it, and finding ways to incorporate it into one’s practice (Goss & Rose, 2002; Whiston, 1996).

What counts as research?

One of the problems for many practitioners might be that they have an unnecessarily narrow view of what constitutes research. They may, for example, see it as a largely individual activity that is empirically constructed, quantitative and statistically driven. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, there is every reason to expand the definition to include a wide range of curiosity-motivated, “finding out” activities (Lewis, 1993). Take the following definitions, for example, since both widen the notion of “research” considerably:

Designing and executing research projects, preparing manuscripts of a theoretical nature or critical review of literature, conducting program evaluations or need assessments, making presentations at professional conferences, participating as a member of a research team engaged in any of the above activities, and advising the research projects of others. (Royalty et al., 1986, p. 14.)

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority's definition of research is also deliberately broad:

All research activities are conducted in accordance with recognised ethical standards and are open to peer and public scrutiny ... The following kinds of research may be distinguished ...

*a. **Basic or fundamental research:** experimental or theoretical work undertaken primarily to acquire new knowledge without any particular application or use in view.*

*b. **Strategic research:** work which is intended to generate new knowledge in an area which has not yet advanced sufficiently to enable specific applications to be identified.*

*c. **Applied research:** work which develops or tests existing knowledge and is primarily directed towards either specific practical objectives or towards the evaluation of policies or practices.*

*d. **Scholarship:** work which is intended to expand the boundaries of knowledge and understanding within and across disciplines by the analysis, synthesis and interpretation of ideas and information, making use of a rigorous methodology.*

*e. **Creative work:** the invention and generation of ideas, hypotheses, images, performances or artefacts, including design, in any field of knowledge, leading to the development of new knowledge, understanding or expertise.*

*f. **Consultancy:** which involves the deployment of existing knowledge and the application of analytical and investigative skills to the resolution of problems presented by a client, usually in an industrial, commercial or professional context.*

*g. **Professional practice:** some of which overlaps with consultancy when conducted at an advanced level. In certain subject areas and professions the theorisation and effectiveness of professional practice are advanced by academic staff that practise and participate in it.*

The outcome of an original research endeavour must be available for public appraisal in appropriate academic or other settings. (NZQA, 1995, Appendix 4.)

Based on these broad definitions there is very little intellectual activity that could not be construed as research, provided it is conducted carefully, systematically, criti-

cally and rigorously, and the findings are presented transparently and fully according to the principles essential to whatever formal methodology was employed (McLeod, 2003). The last point in the NZQA definition is worth noting: research that is done but not made available to others is wasted research; it might as well not have been done at all, since the value of research lies in sharing it with others so they can read it, utilise it, criticise it and add to it. Thus, to qualify as research means the results must be presented or published in some public, accessible form, which does not have to be limited to academic journals. There are many possible outlets, the choice of which is one for the researcher to make depending on, among other things, the intended audience and the style in which it is written.

In the following section the author addresses the counsellor as researcher directly.

Roadblocks to researching

There are many hurdles that have been identified for inexperienced researchers and writers, beliefs that inhibit their researching and publishing efforts. Two such hurdles are doubts about their writing ability and concern about the worth, or correctness, of their ideas (Brown, 1993; Smaby & Crews, 1998). Others have categorised these reasons as fear, including also the problem of thinking of something to research or write about (Brown, 1993; McKenzie, 1998). These problems are often associated with negative self-statements: “No one will be interested in my ideas.” “I will be criticised for what I write.” “I don’t have time because of all my other work.”

In response to the first statement, apply this test: *If you found an article that presented information on the topic you are thinking of researching and writing about, would you find it useful in your work? Interesting? Valuable?* If you can answer “yes”, then you can be assured that there will be others, like yourself, who would also be interested. So, go for it!

For the second statement, apply this test: *When you are critical of someone else’s writing, do you still feel there was something valuable about reading it and thinking the issues through?* If you can answer “yes”, then you can be assured that even if people disagree with your message, your writing will still probably have had some positive effect. Being an author means taking responsibility for and, sometimes, defending one’s ideas. So, go for it!

For the third statement, apply this test: *How many hours per week do you think you need in order to do research and writing?* Compare your estimate with the following information. A US study of 13 *prolific* (my italics) writers in the field of marital and family therapy reported they spent on average 13 hours per week writing and a total of between 23 and over 300 hours to produce a single article (Thomas & McKenzie,

1986). Some years ago I found myself saying “I never get enough time to do my research.” So, as a first step in remedying the situation I decided to keep track of every quarter hour I spent on research and writing over the whole 52 weeks in a year. I did this for a year, and found it so interesting that I continued it for another three years. At the end of that time I stopped, satisfied that I was achieving sufficiently. Then, after a break of four years, I found myself again thinking that I did not have enough time for research so I began my recording exercise again and continued it for another three years. The results certainly surprised me, as they might you (see Table 1).

I found that although most years I was able to spend relatively little time on research and writing, certainly nowhere near the 13 hours per week cited in the Thomas and McKenzie study, I was comparatively productive in terms of completed publications and conference presentations (over the seven years I averaged over five publications and presentations per year). I also estimated that I spent roughly 40–50 hours on each completed publication. From this exercise I recognised that (a) I had become increasingly efficient in the use of my time, and (b) I became very conscious of periods when I was not researching and would then consciously *make time* for my research. As a result, the whole exercise became highly self-motivating. This information is not presented as a model of how you should do things, but rather as evidence that you do not need a lot of time each week to do research and writing. What little time you can manage may not be ideal, or as much as you desire, but if you are dedicated and put in some time, regularly, you can still accomplish a considerable amount. So, if you think this system or a variation of it might help you to understand the way you work best, give it a try.

Table 1: Hours spent on research and writing in a year

Year	1993	1994	1995	1996	2001*	2002	2003	Average: all years
Total hrs	221	149	182	443	317	115	199	232.3
Wk ave.	4.3	2.8	3.5	8.5	6.1	2.2	3.8	4.5
Wk range	0–23	0–12	0–15	0–31	0–21	0–15	0–16	—
Publications + Conf. pres.	7 + 2	4 + 2	2 + 1	5	3	1 + 2	5 + 5	5.6

* 2001, 02 and 03 ran from March through February the following year, e.g., March 2001–Feb 2002; March 2002–Feb 2003; March 2003–Feb 2004.

Get started and keep going, right to the finish!

Now that you have no more excuses, how do you get started? There are several steps that might help you to become more organised and systematic.

1. Decide on a question to research

What is it that has captured your curiosity? This can be a difficult step, especially if you have never done it before. You should realise that sometimes it can take a long time to carry out an idea. For example, two recent projects of mine were years in gestation. One began in the late 1970s, but was only completed in 2001; a second, first begun in 1981, was completed just last year. It is good to start with a modest project: “One small step for counselling; one giant step for the new researcher!” So, if you need some ideas, think about these:

- Evaluate the types of clients you see, how long you see them, and what their outcomes are.
- Write up a case study that has interesting features associated with it.
- Describe your practices, how they were developed and why they work.
- Write a “best practice” or “How to ...” article on a type of client or problem you are in doubt about.
- Summarise your agency’s client data to show trends over time, etc.
- Seek some outside funding (e.g., on application from NZAC, which annually sets aside money for approved research projects) for something you would like to investigate, or the funding source wants investigated.
- Do a literature review and write it up so others can make use of it as well.
- Discuss work ideas with other counsellors; find out what each of you is curious about in your work, then decide if there is something there to investigate more systematically. This approach to research is similar to McLeod’s (2003) suggestion that researchers should take time to find out what practitioners want to know about and then go to it!
- Keep a folder of “Interesting Research Ideas” into which you put ideas that spark a thought, a discussion, or your curiosity. Over time you will accumulate a fund of ideas that you can then bend to fit with your situation and the time available.

2. Have a plan

This should include your question and what previous literature says about it. Then decide what you will do, why you will do it, with whom, by what method, and what data will be collected. At this point you will need to describe what happened, what your results mean and how they can be put to use (i.e., their practical implications).

Finally, decide how the project will be written up and where it might be published. You will also need to get it approved by colleagues, an ethics committee (if applicable), stakeholders (clients, agency, school, professional association, etc.). As a way of pulling all of this together, it is useful to draw up a time-line setting out tasks to be done in the order in which they need doing.

3. Find a research mentor

Find someone who is an experienced researcher, someone who can guide you, answer your many questions, and give you support and inspiration. But remember, your project is yours, and its success depends on your own motivation and input, not someone else's. Some people find they work better in a team, so it might be useful for you to find someone of like mind and interests to collaborate with you on a piece of research. This is actually very common, but first make sure that everyone in the team is motivated, dedicated and will be a solid contributor.

4. Complete what you start

There's nothing to writing. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead. (Gene Fowler, 1992.)

Yes, writing up a study can feel a bit like that at times. However, make a start, then keep going; and that means right to the final draft stage, and then deciding where to submit it for publication. A good rule of thumb is "Don't write anything that you won't also publish." You do not have to stick rigidly to this, but always have a good reason for breaking it. Also, it is easy to get stuck along the way and give up, or fool yourself that you are working when really all you are doing is writing and rewriting the same material. Finish your project, write it up and submit it.

5. Where to publish?

This is an important decision and you should take time to decide. Things to think about include the following:

- Note sources that have published pieces that you find interesting to read, in a style you like.
- What is the journal/newsletter's reputation? Are you happy with that?
- Decide on your audience: who would benefit from receiving this information? Is it an academic audience? Practitioners? Parents? Clients?
- Read several journals' purpose statements and "Guidelines for Authors" notes carefully. How well does your research interest/idea match? Which ones seem to suit you best?
- Is the journal/newsletter peer reviewed? Is that important to you?

- Finally, choose one and have a go! Once you decide, follow the “guidelines” carefully. They are there for a reason. And then be patient; it can take up to 12 months or more from submission to celebrating the actual publishing.

It is also important to *be persistent*. It is common for writers to prepare three or four drafts before submitting a piece of writing, and then for it to go through two to four revisions before being accepted (Smaby & Crews, 1998). Remember, too, that editors and reviewers are trying to give constructive criticism, not delivering personal attacks on your work.

6. Once you have submitted a piece, move on to the next project

Always have a project or two on the go. It is no problem if they take longer to complete than you expected; the key is to stick at it and do what you can as often as you can. The end will eventually arrive, often before you know it. And when it does, move on. Don't wait for lots of feedback, you may not get it and, besides, that's not the point. Keep your published gem in perspective: it is one more piece in the puzzle.

Reading research

This is often the first step in doing research. While it might seem an easy task and one not worth discussing, it can be time-consuming and tedious if you attempt to read every word and treat all sections of a paper as equally important. Several writers have given excellent hints on this topic and if you want to read further, consult McLeod (2003, Chap. 2) or Wyatt (2001, Chap. 3).

No one can expect to keep up with the flood of new material that appears every year. The best you can do is to choose several publications you find consistently useful and consult them regularly. When you start your research project, you will have to be more thorough and comprehensive, but your regular reading will help keep you in touch with what is available elsewhere. If you are unsure where to start, ask colleagues for recommendations, or go to a library and browse the literature (most libraries are happy to help people learn basic searching skills). Remember to look up cited articles in reference lists. This will point you toward other outlets that publish similar material. In general the literature is categorised into various sub-specialities; there are general and specialist journals; and there is considerable overlap among the fields of counselling, psychology, health, nursing, psychiatry, education and social work. In all of them you will find opinion pieces, review papers, research reports that make use of various research methods, case studies, meta-analyses and historical pieces.

When deciding whether to read a research article, start with the title. Look for relevance and interest, but remember, titles are often deceiving. If a title looks

promising, look next at the abstract. A well-written abstract should give you a good overview of the contents, enough to tell if it is worth looking further. Very quickly it should give you an idea about the sample, the method and the findings. You should skim read to see what was done and why, how the subjects were selected, what was done to or with them and how the data was collected/recorded, and then look at the results and implications. In this way you can get a good overview of the study and decide whether you need to go back over any part of it more carefully. With practice you will become more efficient and effective at picking out the essence of an article. You will also know when you need to read something more carefully (e.g., when relating it to your own research) or just for interest (e.g., when browsing, skimming, or just getting a feel for a field, journal or magazine).

Summary

It is hoped that this article has given you some useful ideas about conducting your own research and enthused you to make a start. Once the initial reluctance or fear is conquered, intrinsic interest and curiosity will probably take over and push you to completion. I look forward to reading your material in this journal or the Newsletter!

References

- Brown, R. (1993). *Second manual for conducting workshops on postgraduate supervision*. Queensland Department of Primary Industries.
- Cohen, L.H., Sargent, M.M. & Sechrest, L.B. (1986). Use of psychotherapy research by professional psychologists. *American Psychologist*, 41: 198–206.
- Editor's Statement (1984). *New Zealand Journal of Counselling and Guidance*, 6 (1): iv.
- Falvey, J.E. (1989). Passion and professionalism: Critical rapprochement for mental health research. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 11: 86–105.
- Falvey, J.E. (1991). Rethinking research: Form and function in a clinical curriculum. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 13: 221–35.
- Gelso, C.J. (1993). On the making of a scientist-practitioner: A theory of research training in professional psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 24: 468–76.
- Goss, S. & Rose, S. (2002). Evidence based practice: A guide for counsellors and psychotherapists. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 23 (2): 67–76.
- Lewis, C. (1993). Making use of research. In R. Bayne & P. Nicolson (Eds), *Counselling and psychology for health professionals*, pp. 223–36. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Loughead, T.A., Black, R.J. & Menefee, L.A. (1991). Systematic approach to research training: Benefits for counseling practice. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 13: 270–78.

- Manthei, R.J. (1991). Content analysis of the *New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association Journal*: Volumes 1–12, 1976–1990. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 13 (1): 12–17.
- Manthei, R. (2001). Content analysis of the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*: Volumes 13–21, 1991–2000. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 22 (1): 1–12.
- Manthei, R.J. & Miller, J. (1991). New Zealand counselling, therapy and guidance-related literature, 1980 and 1989: A bibliography. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 13: 35–71.
- Manthei, R. & Miller, J. (2001). New Zealand counselling, therapy and guidance-related literature published between 1990 and 1999: A bibliography. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 22 (1): 13–110.
- Manthei, R. & Stanley, P. (2004). Counselling psychology in New Zealand: The quest for identity and recognition. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, in press.
- McKenzie, M. (1998). You should write that up: Getting practitioners started on writing for publication. *Social Work Review*, December: 20–24.
- McLeod, J. (2003). *Doing counselling research*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.
- NZQA (1995). *Quality assurance for degrees and related qualifications. Appendix Four*. Wellington: New Zealand Qualifications Authority.
- Pistole, M.C. & Roberts, A. (2002). Mental health counselling: Toward resolving identity confusions. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 24: 1–19.
- Royalty, G.M., Gelso, C.J., Mallinckrodt, B. & Garrett, K.D. (1986). The environment and the student in counseling psychology: Does the research training environment influence graduate students' attitudes toward research? *Counseling Psychologist*, 14: 9–30.
- Sackett, D.L., Rosenberg, W.M.C., Gray, J.A.M., Haynes, R.B. & Richardson, W.S. (1996). Evidence-based medicine: What it is and what it is not. *British Medical Journal*, 312: 71–72.
- Sexton, T.L, Whiston, S.C., Bleuer, J.C. & Walz, G.R. (1997). *Integrating outcome research into counselling practice and training*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Smaby, M.H. & Crews, J. (1998). Publishing in scholarly journals. Part 1: Is it an attitude or technique? It's an attitude. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 37: 218–23.
- Small, J.J. (1980). Guidance and counselling research in New Zealand. In *Research in education in New Zealand: State of the art*. Delta, Monograph No. 3, Massey University: Palmerston North: New Zealand Association for Research in Education.
- Thomas, F.N. & McKenzie, P.N. (1986). Prolific writers in marital family therapy: A research note. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 12: 175–80.
- Whiston, S.C. (1996). Accountability through action research: Research methods for practitioners. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 74: 616–23.
- Wyatt, J.C. (2001). *Clinical knowledge and practice in the information age: A handbook for health professionals*. London: Royal Society of Medicine Press.

This paper is based on the Keynote Address given at the first NZAC Conference held in Wellington, October 2003.