

## BOOK REVIEW:

# Doing Counselling Research

By J. McLeod

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Reviewed by Fran Parkin

In an era when evidence-based practice is expected, few counsellors can afford to eschew the legitimacy of research. One of the problems with counselling is that “What may on the surface appear to be a simple conversation between client and counsellor can be understood at many levels and from many perspectives” (McLeod, 2003, iii).

*Doing Counselling Research*, however, reflects the multi-faceted reality of this undertaking, and views counselling as an applied discipline that draws on ideas and techniques from the humanities, theology, philosophy, sociology and anthropology as well as from the more familiar sources in psychology and medicine.

John McLeod is a prolific author and researcher, and a powerful communicator. His years of experience and involvement at the interface of counselling and research mean that he writes from the inside, drawing ideas from a huge range of sources. Interestingly, within the 25 pages of references in this book, 19 articles or books by McLeod himself are listed, all written in the last 14 years. He is also the founding editor of *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, a journal he set up to provide an international forum for research in counselling and psychotherapy.

In this new edition of *Doing Counselling Research*, McLeod continues to write on the basic principles of research and inquiry and their application to counselling and psychotherapy. His chapters cover the fundamentals, with topics such as how to review the literature; select appropriate methods (both qualitative and quantitative); collect data; design and implement an effective research plan; analyse the results, and disseminate findings.

What brings these potentially dry topics alive is the strong practical basis and McLeod’s enthusiasm for his subject. The book features boxed insets of key ideas that make for easy reading. Topics that are highlighted range from “How to survive a research project: some predictable crises” and “Strategies for combining quantitative and qualitative research” to “Criticisms of therapy research made by practitioners”. His guidelines are peppered with examples and stories that tease out interesting aspects

from vast piles of research.

McLeod is expansive and inclusive in his approach. Embedded as he is in the counselling/therapy worldview, he roams widely around the topic and covers research from many perspectives – but always with an eye for the sacredness of the human soul.

He also throws out a number of challenges to counsellors. In the chapter devoted to critical issues he looks at the serious research-practice gap and reminds us that all of the key figures in the development of psychotherapy – Freud, Jung, Rogers, Perls, Moreno, Wolpe, Ellis, Beck – made their important discoveries in the clinic; even if some of them went on to test the validity of these discoveries through systematic research.

He reminds us too that practitioners' catalogued fear of introducing research interviews and questionnaires, on the basis that it might interfere with the therapeutic process or be resented by clients, is not backed by evidence. On the contrary, he says, research has shown that a majority of clients reported that "questionnaires and interviews were slightly to moderately helpful in ... facilitating therapy".

What makes this book so readable is its coverage of the importance of both mastery (mastering and scientifically predicting human behaviour) and mystery (accepting that human nature also defies understanding). McLeod concludes that as a practitioner it is always necessary to develop mastery and expertise, to carry out the tasks of therapy as well as one can. But he reminds us too of the sense of mystery – no matter how well researched and "evidence-based" an approach to therapy may be, it is only a temporary "clearing", not a final answer.

For counselling students, this will be a textbook. For academics and practitioners contemplating research, it is inspirational. I recommend it as essential reading (and it is very readable) for all of us. McLeod's final challenge bears repeating:

*All of us, therapists, clients, researchers, are engaged in negotiating and co-constructing shared understandings of events. These events are best seen as local knowledges rather than universal truth, as a way of contributing to a never-ending dialogue and conversation about the meaning of things and the right basis for action. The starting point and well-spring of this type of inquiry is the fundamental human experience of not knowing: the best researchers are those with the best questions, not the best answers.*