

Research on workplace counselling: an invitation to dialogue

John McLeod proposes a research agenda for workplace counselling

Workplace counselling, including in-house services and employee assistance programmes (EAPs) and other forms of provision, represent a major international industry. One might imagine that any large-scale activity of this type, operating in a marketplace that makes high demands around value for money, quality and effectiveness, would be supported by a substantial research literature. Yet this is not the case. In a review of research into workplace counselling commissioned by BACP^{1,2}, I was forced to conclude that research in this area was fragmented and ultimately unsatisfactory – there is insufficient evidence to guide policy and practice around the key issues and choices faced by practitioners, service users or purchasers. Other reviewers have arrived at the same conclusion. A recent review and critique of theory and research into ways of coping with work stress does not mention counselling at all³, despite the fact that one of the authors (Cary Cooper) was responsible for two of the landmark studies of workplace counselling carried out in the 1990s. There are two journals that specifically focus on the topic of workplace counselling: the present journal, and the *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*. Both of these journals publish readable and relevant articles on a wide range of aspects of workplace counselling. However, very few of these articles comprise reports of original research. There is a similar situation in generic counselling and occupational health journals – few studies of workplace counselling are being published.

Does this matter? It could be argued that the field of workplace counselling continues to thrive in the absence of a strong research base, so why worry? Purchasers and providers of services seem to be convinced by their own assessment of the effectiveness and economic benefits of the counselling that they deliver, so why go to the trouble of commissioning or supporting independent research studies? What does it matter if the knowledge base for workplace counselling has not been scrutinised in relation to the highest standards of academic rigour – academics just

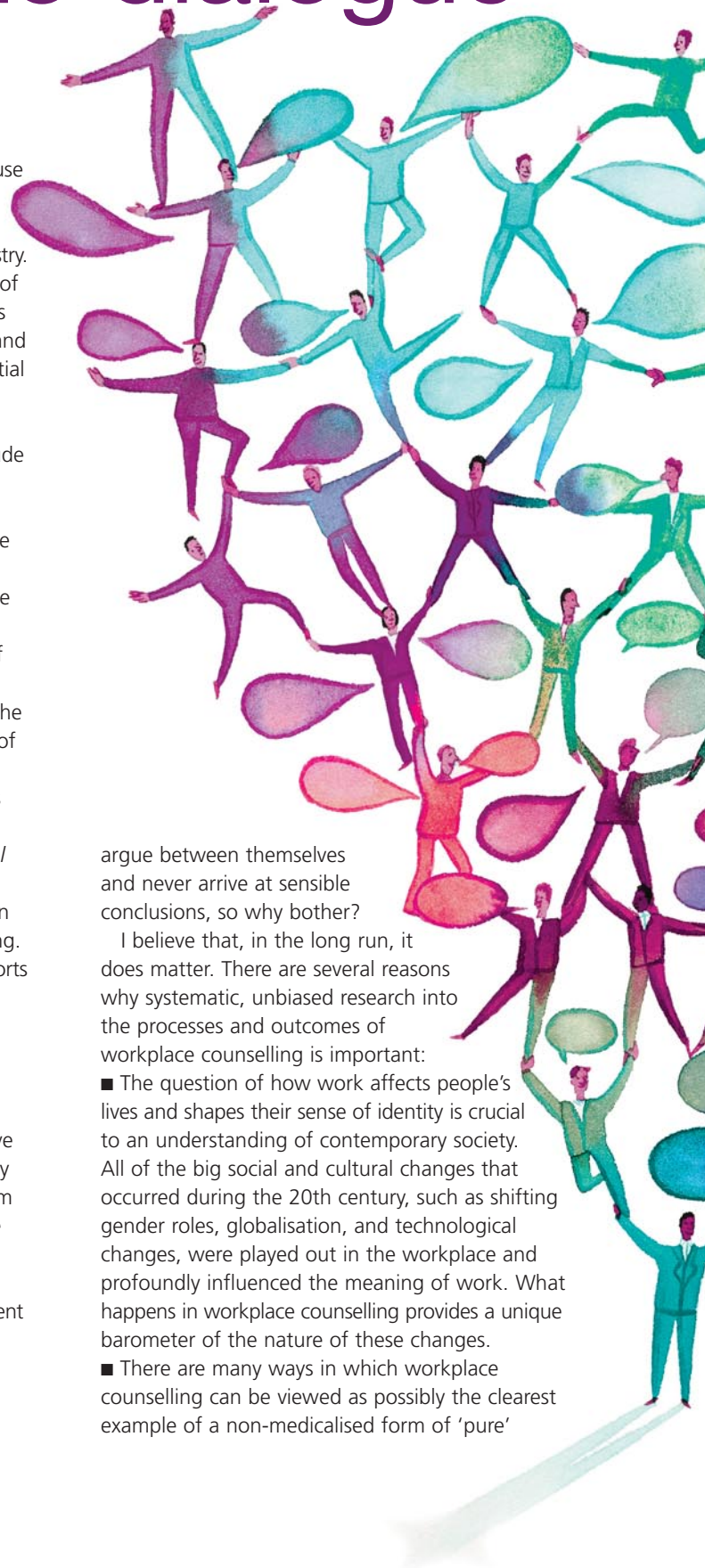
argue between themselves and never arrive at sensible conclusions, so why bother?

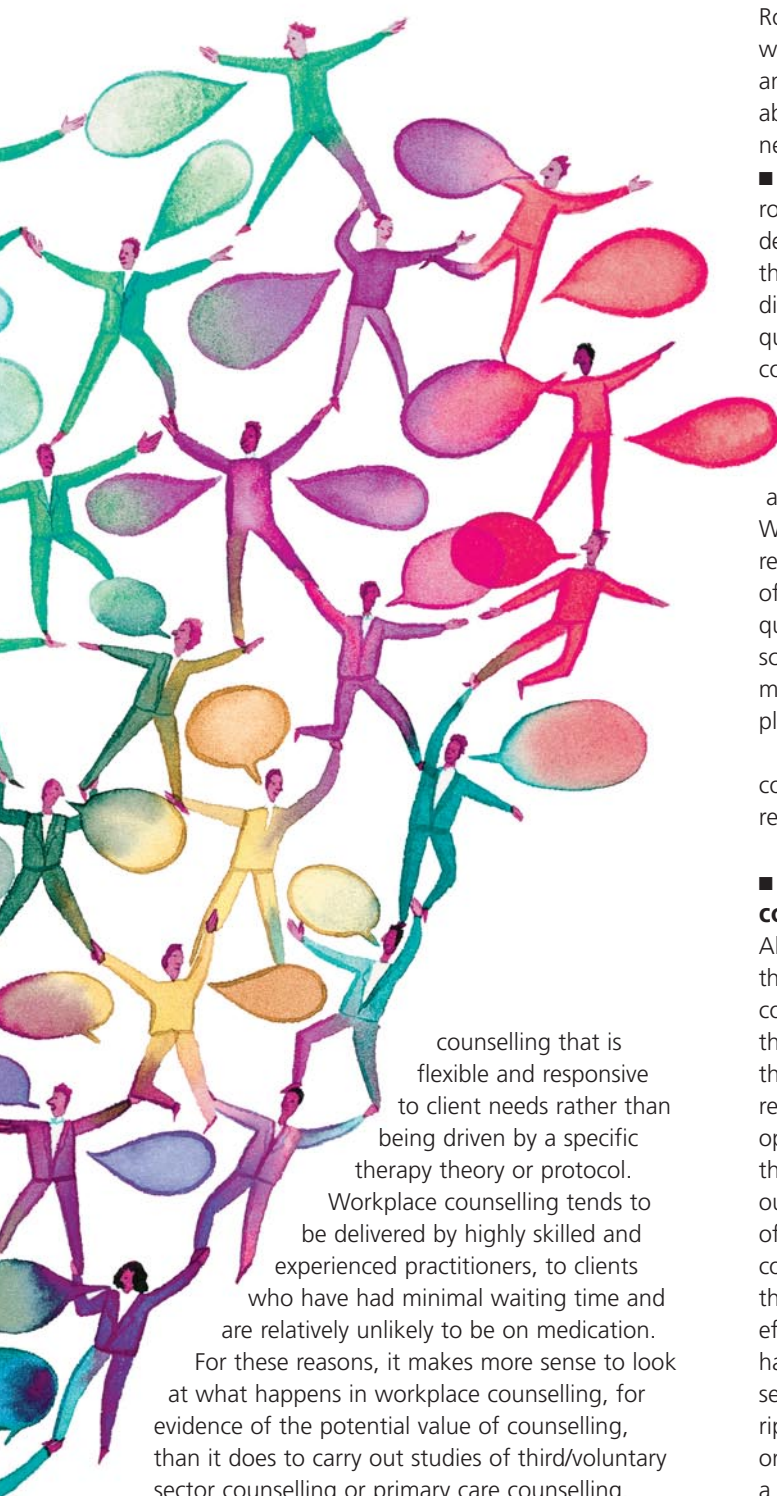
I believe that, in the long run, it does matter. There are several reasons why systematic, unbiased research into the processes and outcomes of workplace counselling is important:

- The question of how work affects people's lives and shapes their sense of identity is crucial to an understanding of contemporary society. All of the big social and cultural changes that occurred during the 20th century, such as shifting gender roles, globalisation, and technological changes, were played out in the workplace and profoundly influenced the meaning of work. What happens in workplace counselling provides a unique barometer of the nature of these changes.

- There are many ways in which workplace counselling can be viewed as possibly the clearest example of a non-medicalised form of 'pure'

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counselling that is flexible and responsive to client needs rather than being driven by a specific therapy theory or protocol.

Workplace counselling tends to be delivered by highly skilled and experienced practitioners, to clients who have had minimal waiting time and are relatively unlikely to be on medication.

For these reasons, it makes more sense to look at what happens in workplace counselling, for evidence of the potential value of counselling, than it does to carry out studies of third/voluntary sector counselling or primary care counselling.

■ Research findings can be used to enhance the quality and effectiveness of services that are delivered to clients. Starting with the work of Carl Rogers in the 1940s, there are many examples of ways in which research has been used to refine and develop therapy practice. If we are serious about doing the best by our clients, our practice needs to be informed by research.

■ Involvement in research can play an important role in counsellor personal and professional development. Research represents a valuable means through which practitioners can evaluate and disseminate ideas and innovations, explore burning questions, develop a professional identity and contribute to the profession as a whole.

These areas reflect a powerful rationale for the view that involvement in research should become an integral part of routine counselling practice. Within the field of counselling and psychotherapy research there is a wide acceptance of the principle of methodological pluralism – the idea that qualitative and quantitative approaches, large-scale studies, single case studies and many other methodologies each have an important role to play in building a comprehensive knowledge base.

What might a research agenda for workplace counselling look like? In my view, there are some research questions that urgently require attention:

■ The effectiveness of workplace counselling

Although several studies have been published into the outcomes of EAP and other forms of workplace counselling, all of these studies can be criticised on the basis of significant methodological weaknesses that limit the confidence that we can have in the results that they have reported. There are many opportunities for future researchers to build on the work of previous outcome research, and carry out investigations that will yield better estimations of the impact of different approaches to workplace counselling. For example, there are very few studies that have carried out long-term follow-up of the effect of counselling. There are few studies that have looked at the ways in which counselling services can influence organisational culture – the ripple effect through which emotional learning in one person who has received counselling can make a difference to other members of his or her team.

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■ Case studies that document what happens in workplace counselling

In recent years there have been important developments in case study methodology, that have strengthened the capacity of case study inquiry to yield valid and rigorous findings⁴. Useful case studies can be carried out into *typical* cases, as a means of documenting and disseminating an understanding of how counselling can work with clients with different problems. Case studies can also be used to study the process and outcome of *unusual* cases, such as clients with non-standard problems, or where the therapist is working in an innovative manner.

■ The client's experience of counselling

On the whole, research in counselling and psychotherapy is carried out from the perspective of the professional 'expert', and reflects the ideas and priorities of this group. As a result, research that focuses instead on the experiences of clients is particularly valuable, in terms of opening up new understandings. Very few qualitative studies have been published that have allowed clients of workplace counselling to talk about what therapy has meant to them, how it has helped them (or otherwise) and their suggestions for improving the services that they have received.

■ The negative effects of counselling

Studies of counselling and psychotherapy in other settings have found that five and 10 per cent of clients report negative outcomes (ie get worse). In addition, studies have found that counsellors

undertaking master's or doctoral projects or combining their efforts in practitioner research networks. Sources of funding are available for more extensive studies. The BACP research website includes information on sources of funding, and BACP is developing an independent Research Foundation. The Employee Assistance Research Foundation (www.eapfoundation.org) has been specifically set up to support workplace counselling research, and has identified the effectiveness of EAP interventions as a primary area in which research proposals are invited. Most workplace counselling services have well-established systems for collecting audit data on clients – it is not hard to devise ways to integrate research instruments into these procedures. Access to findings of previous research is not hard. A detailed description, and reference details, of all research studies published between 1980 and 2005 is available¹, as is a summary of the findings of these studies². The latter source is available online to BACP members through the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* journal website.

The aim of this article has been to invite dialogue and discussion. Am I mistaken that little research into workplace counselling is being published? Have I missed important sources of information? Are there flaws in the argument that further research in this area would be beneficial at a number of levels, to individuals, organisations and society as a whole? I look forward to receiving email correspondence on these issues, and any other aspects of research and inquiry into workplace counselling, and to be able to publish a response in this journal in due course. ■

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are not very good at knowing when clients are getting worse. These themes are not reflected in existing research into workplace counselling. This is surprising, given that many clients record high levels of distress at intake⁵, and typically receive only a limited number of counselling sessions. Are workplace counselling services particularly effective in avoiding negative outcomes? Or is this kind of information just not being reported?

Many of these questions can be adequately pursued through small-scale local research, by practitioners

References

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