Using Grounded Theory to Develop a Framework for Counselling Skills Competences

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Background to the research

My presentation describes a project commissioned by the professional standards department of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy; BACP identified a need for a **counselling skills and competence framework** for the care sector.

The initial aims were to carry out a systematic literature review of counselling skills, in order to identify and develop a counselling skills competencies framework; this was aimed for individuals in a range of care settings who might use counselling skills despite not being occupationally qualified counsellors. The project was part of the BACP’s strategic aims to define the scope and the standards of training and practice needed for the use of counselling skills in a variety of occupational and voluntary settings such as the NHS, social care, education and training, voluntary and private sector settings.

I was involved in the project throughout and introduced and applied the grounded theory method to address the limitations of the systematic review.
Aim

This is a methodological paper. I present the application of Grounded Theory (GT) to incorporate, synthesise and analyse different data sources. These were the systematic review, an additional fourteen papers chosen by a group of independent experts involved in the project and the views of experts.

This mixed method added rigour and quality through layers of critical and expert input to enhance the limitations of the systematic review (SR) on counselling skills. It provided the necessary analytic steps, to enhance the quality of a framework for counselling competences.
The impetus for adopting a mixed methods approach

There were intrinsic limitations to the systematic review of the literature. As the external expert overseers indicated, there were some competences that the literature failed to highlight. The paper shows that grounded theory allowed expansion of the data field to include the contribution from empirical research and the views of experts from a range of occupations. It demonstrated how a mixed methods approach added rigour and reliability to the developing framework.
Limitations of systematic review of the literature

+ The information analyst, who carried out the systematic review and produced an initial scoping report, highlighted the emerging counselling skills. These were manifold and raised questions about the value and validity of the project as initially defined.

+ The systematic review did not produce quality data that captures counselling skills.

+ The initial scoping report described a limited range of material with which to work effectively.

+ The scoping report highlighted a vast array of literature describing highly idiosyncratic accounts of counselling skills in various settings, which were correspondingly ill defined and nebulous.

+ There were few studies of quality and few demonstrating the efficacy and specific application of skills.
The limitations led to a review of the methodology being used and the CG and ERG agreed to broaden the research design and to use a combination of methods by incorporating a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). This would allow input from a wider range of research material and an element of researcher interpretation, in order to improve the authority and validity of the analytic process and the final framework outcome.
The process

The external expert overseers indicated that there were some competences that the literature review failed to highlight.

A core group of practitioners and academics (CG) engaged in open and axial coding holding in mind the goals of the review.

Critical assessment and scrutiny through dialogue and reflection achieved saturation and agreement of the final framework.

This meticulous process was inclusive of the views of experts in the field of counselling and led to an integrated framework of counselling skills for non-occupational counsellors.

The steps of researcher immersion produced by the systematic review and data reduction and saturation through the GT constant comparative analysis are discussed.

The reliability and validity of this research rests on the principles of trustworthiness, rigour and reflexivity.

The use of grounded theory enabled the expert views to be added, which enhanced rigour and reliability to the developing framework.
A number of working groups were involved in the development of the project and the final determination of the framework. These were:

- Core group (CG)
- Expert reference group (ERG)
- Expert quality assurance group (EQAG)
- Peer review group (PRG)
Deciding the Research Methodology

The nebulous nature of counselling skills made it challenging to identify every role, setting, skill, technique and psychological approach. Our initial experience of conducting this review seemed to confirm Hill and Lent’s (2006) conclusions that there are few reliable studies that provide a clear definition of counselling skills. It is not surprising therefore that the initial scoping report described a limited range of material with which to work effectively.
The Grounded Theory Method

+ The constructivist approach to grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006) is based on the view that the researcher cannot hold their subjectivity in abeyance or bracket preconceptions and biases as traditional grounded theory advocated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967. Charmaz (2006, p. 10) states that:

+ In the classic grounded theory works, Glaser and Strauss talk about discovering theory as emerging from data separate from the scientific observer. Unlike their position, we assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect.
The research material eventually used for the grounded theory constant comparative analysis consisted of themes derived from the systematic review, the additional fourteen articles suggested by the EQAG and the views of experts. We described the combination data, ‘systematic review plus’.

The initial data coding was carried out by a team led by an experienced grounded theory researcher and psychotherapist aided by two psychotherapists, all members of the CG. Following discussion of the data, we were able to identify and label prevalent codes.

This initial coding formed the basis for further data collection, and further analysis that led to saturation of the emerging themes.
Helping Skills
• Immediacy
• Listening
• Restatement
• Reframing
• Non-verbal skills
• Challenge
• Responding skills
• Unhelpful communication (managing subjectivity)

Personal qualities
• Self-awareness
• Personal qualities
• Natural helping skills
• Personal traits
• Self-awareness
• Resilience
• Honesty
• Patience
• Respect
• Trust

Role Responsiveness
• Ability to respond to someone’s physical, practical, psychological needs
• Client-centred
• Practitioner responsiveness
• Practical goal focus, balance between physical and psychological
• Attunement
• Empathic opportunity
• Diversity
• Sensitivity to culture
• Work cautiously with distress

Helping interaction
• Helping relationship
• Collaboration
• Rapport
• Managing power imbalance
• Encouraging autonomy

Empathy
• Understanding through empathy
• Naming and attending to emotion
• Collaborative communication
## Coding example (data from systematic review)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data from systematic review</th>
<th>Initial codes</th>
<th>Focused codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note: Review of a vast range of literature to identify initial and focused codes</td>
<td>a) Outcomes/benefits counselling skills</td>
<td>Benefits of counselling skills / helping skills (a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) empathy</td>
<td>Professionalism and ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) roles</td>
<td>Roles/settings/definitions/terms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) limits and referral</td>
<td>Therapeutic conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) client centered</td>
<td>The relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) responding skills</td>
<td>Listening and responding skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) training</td>
<td>Diversity and Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) helper credibility</td>
<td>Models and stages of helping work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) helping relationship</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) instrumental support</td>
<td>Common factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) information support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis of data (consisting of the systematic review)

During a mapping exercise we grouped codes that related to each other together, then agreed a category that captured their meaning. Comparisons then constituted each stage of analytic development, a stage that revises categories to ensure they capture the meaning of codes (concepts) (Charmaz, 2006, p.187).

We compared categories and reduced them if they represented the same meaning and moved codes into the most relevant category until saturation. Saturation was determined when all the search criteria identified by the CG and ERG were incorporated into the theming and grouped into provisional counselling skills categories.
### Table 3. Summary of Competence Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional context</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Skills and techniques</th>
<th>Working alliance</th>
<th>Personal qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills within legal, ethical and professional guidelines</td>
<td>Ability to communicate empathic understanding</td>
<td>Ability to use a range of listening and responding skills appropriately</td>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills to establish, maintain and end the work</td>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work within professional boundaries appropriate to role and setting</td>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills empathically, to understand and respond appropriately to those experiencing painful and distressing emotions</td>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills collaboratively</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to draw on helpful personal attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills to enhance but not change the primary role</td>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills to work empathically with a diversity of persons, setting and situations</td>
<td>Ability to use counselling skills in interactions with other professionals, carers, friends and family of the person you are working with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to offer appropriate care and support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to identify, assess and respond to risk and emergency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to make use of professional support and guidance</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Findings

Five competences emerged from the analysis that formed the grounded theory that emerged as shown below. Each consisted of a number of themes that elaborate and make up the particular competence and which are derived from meaningful chunks of data coded as described earlier in diagram 1.

<table>
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Conceptual Framework

categories and sub-categories of the grounded theory **Relational Professional Relationship** derived from five main categories that made up the key competences: **Working Alliance**, **Empathy**, **Skills & Techniques** and **Personal Qualities**.

data analysts interpreted the alliance, empathy and personal qualities in individuals using counselling skills were fundamental for a relational professional relationship.

necessary abilities a) of self awareness; b) of recognizing and utilizing helpful personal attributes, as well as collaboration, listening and responding appropriately, helped form an alliance and were the qualities that influenced the theory of a **Relational Professional Relationship**.

more technical competences were interpreted as the bedrock, in GT the **necessary conditions** for ensuring a foundational bedrock consisting of ethical, technical, professional context specific skills and techniques, to distinguish individuals using counselling skills and competences from other, lay persons.

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Figure 1. Conceptual framework

- Counselling competences
- Relational professional relationship
- Working alliance
- Empathy
- Personal qualities
- Professional context skills
- Skills & techniques

Foundational for professional relationship
Summary

The systematic review ensured a rigorous literature search and analysis of published theoretical opinion and empirical evidence; it highlighted the complexity and ambiguity around the definitions used to describe the variety of both counselling skills and occupations relevant to the study.

The review limitations led to the need for an interpretative methodology and more current input of material from independent experts in the field. This led to the adoption of a constructivist approach to grounded theory and was created into mixed methods. This improved the quality of the research method and analytic process allowing a broader interrogation of the subject area.
Conclusions & implications

+ The limitations identified in the systematic literature review led us to adopt the GT method and to add additional relevant data to the project.

+ GT helped enrich the data that led to the competencies framework that was soundly based on a range of sources of knowledge and expertise of the subject, the context for its use, and the factors influencing its effectiveness.

+ Two implications are noted:
  + a) Grounded theory is an effective method in ensuring methodological rigour in the analysis of systematic reviews;
  + b) literature shows the limitations of systematic reviews that researchers conducting such studies must be mindful of.
Website link to BACP published counselling skills competences framework

+ https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/8890/bacp-counselling-skills-competence-framework-may20.pdf

+ https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/8889/bacp-counselling-skills-framework-user-guide-may20.pdf

+ https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/8891/bacp-counselling-skills-framework-methodology-may20.pdf