

Research and me: tales from trips to research-land and back to practice.



Presentation by Anne Bentley
anne.bentley@plymouth.ac.uk



A Story

Of politics, belonging and power and a counsellor's journey into research.

‘Whatever else a story is, it is not simply the lived life. It speaks all around the life: it provides routes into a life, lays down maps for lives to follow, suggests links between a life and culture. It may indeed be one of the most important tools we have for understanding lives and the wider culture they are part of.’

(Plummer 1995, p.168, quoted in Doucet and Mauthner, 2008)

What will I be looking at today?

- Where are we now in Higher Education and in Counselling in Higher Education?
- What do I mean by research – the Big R and the Little R?
- Why am I here? Perhaps another question is why am I still here?
- How do we belong in this scary old word and why is it so hard? The tensions between therapy and academia – it isn't easy being here.

What will I be looking at today?

- Inside but separate – how do we get the respect and recognition we deserve for what we do?
- Research and belonging – by researching non-belonging I helped my service to belong
- Little R – data, data, data
- Ode to joy – research is fun!

**Here's a
picture of
Plymouth:**

**because
stories are
context-
dependent**



Where we are now: Higher Education

- FEES: Since 2012 currently universities up to £9250.
- Marketisation (Brown, 2015) and increased competition for student-fee revenue.
- Managerialism and have positioned universities, as service providers, and students, as consumers (Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011).
- Demographic dip - declining numbers of eighteen year olds in the population (Bennett, 2018; Weale, 2018; ONS, 2018).
- Augar review (May 2019) proposes dropping fees to £7000, expectation that universities will make 'efficiency gains'

Where we are now: University Counselling Services

- Increase in students declaring mental health conditions (Thornley, 2017)
- Increasing mental health complexity (Broglia, Millings, & Barkham, 2017)
- Increasing frequency and severity of complex mental health conditions in university students (Brown, 2016; Hughes, Panjwani, Tulcidas, & Byrom, 2018; Thornley, 2017).
- Sector wide increases in demand for university counselling services (Coughlan, 2015; Sandeman, 2016; Thornley, 2017)

Where we are now: austerity bites

- Adult mental health services which are overstretched and struggling to meet the mental health needs of the community in a timely way (Brown, 2016; Cooper, 2014).
- Long waiting lists for treatment for complex mental health conditions are common (Mental Health Taskforce, 2016)
- meaning that university support services are increasingly called upon to support students with complex mental health needs and students in mental health crisis (Caleb, 2014)

And yet ..

- We live in a time of opportunity
- If we can respond and support students with mental health conditions, then counselling services can potentially demonstrate economic value, through the support and retention of these students, and position themselves more powerfully within the field of HE

Government attention

- Sam Gyimah – 14th Sept 2018 – letter to all VCs
- He described ‘student mental health and wellbeing’ as one of his **‘top priorities’**
- He stated,

‘Collectively, we must prioritise the wellbeing and mental health of our students – there is **no negotiation** on this.’

What do I mean by Research?

Say hello to Big R and to Little R

Big R – the ethics-approved projects, undertaken by practitioners with participants, methods, results and discussions.

This is the data to make something new, create knowledge.

Little R – (just as important) – using others research to build and support our arguments; gathering data; benchmarking our data with other institutions; gathering contextual data about community service provision. This is the data we use to scaffold our story; to build our houses.

**| Why am I
here?**



What is knowledge in counselling terms?

- Relational – a process – a way of being
- A way of living- (lived knowledge) success happens in the ways that lives are lived outside of the counselling space
- Results of counselling can be intangible (intangible knowledge)
-
- It isn't linear - results can happen later, long after the counselling has ended (non-linear knowledge)
- Sometimes successful counselling is can escape words, it can be felt more than articulated (a felt sense)
- Personal to the client

What is knowledge in academic terms?

- Knowledge builds on other knowledge to create a body of **subject-specific** knowledge which is given to students – knowledge is for general use
- ‘conditions of worth’ for an academic relies on generating research outputs (publications) as generalizable **publicly-available** knowledge
- Their work is **measured** by QAA, TEF, REF, KEF, peer review

| The Counselling Lady Story



Finding a place at the table

It occurs to me that whilst communities are created to encompass people with a common bond or theme or task, be it an academic community, a swimming club or a political party, they are also designed on the backs of those who are not allowed to belong.

Belonging: longing to belong?

‘different modes of belonging fold and twist the social fabric of life, so that we find ourselves in in unexpected ways using desires for belonging as threads that lead us into unforeseen places and connections’ (Probyn 1996, p. 22)

A story about survival
threatened

Background to the first piece of research

- The story of restructures, service reviews and cuts is no longer new. As marketization embeds itself, all academic and professional services are, perhaps rightfully, under scrutiny to ensure value for money.
- In 2013 my service was restructured and we lost a number of counselling posts going from:

(2013-14) **6.01 FTE** counsellors

To

(2014-15) **3.87 FTE** counsellors

**‘I was just like, Wow!’: Students’
perceptions of how counselling
benefitted their academic experience.
(Bentley, 2018).**

7 students, 2 categories, lots of
academic gain

| Results

**2 types of counselling student conceived
via 2 metaphors**

Acquisition vs Participation

“

*I was able to take what the
counsellor taught me.*

(John, acquisition)

“ *When someone repeats it back to you you’re challenging some of the views you might have You would be thinking about it afterwards ... rather than just a passive approach, it’s quite active in the way that you work. (Paul, participation)*

All students reported that counselling helped them engage more fully in academic activities and perceived counselling as enhancing their academic attainment.

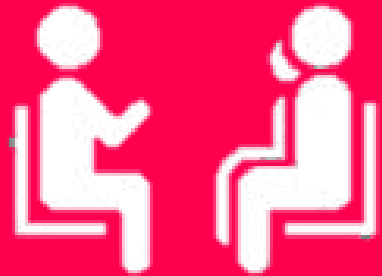
So no surprises there (I trust)

“ *because the worrying’s gone, I
am able to concentrate. (John)*

“

before the counselling, I wasn't actually participating, I was passive, just turning up, rather than turning up to learn. (Paul)

Counselling was beneficial to the academic experience



COUNSELLING

- It was a learning experience for students.
- It offered an educative experience
- It was a site of learning within a learning setting (university),
- It offered a complementary learning experience to the academic learning one

The process of research – why it is helpful to counsellors

It exposed me to other research that suggested:

Mental health issues can negatively impact upon university students' academic outcomes

(Eisenberg, Golberstein & Hunt, 2009; El Ansari & Stock, 2010)

AND

Counselling has a positive association with improved academic functioning

(Biasi, Patrizi, Mosca & De Vincenzo, 2016; Choi, Buskey & Johnson, 2010; McKenzie, Murray, Murray & Richelieu, 2015; Wallace, 2012)

Research makes the familiar strange

‘...the disorientation that is necessary to understanding just how the world looks different to someone else.’ (Disch, 1994)

| **Entering new
territory – new
identities, new
skills**

A new possibility of belonging

‘social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community’ (Young, 1990, p.303)

The Second Piece: UKCISA-funded research

UKCISA - yearly opportunities to apply for grants to support research projects or other projects.

This is a great opportunity for counsellors to get money to pay for research assistants to conduct research into the international students' experience.

This funding allows counselling services to buy in or import academic capital or academic expertise to conduct credible academic research into areas of importance and priority.

I used the money (£5000) to buy in someone to statistically analyse questionnaires sent to international students, to pay for a research assistant to conduct focus groups, to pay for a transcriber to transcribe them.

International students and Student Wellbeing Services?

Of all students accessing Student Wellbeing Services in 2014-15, 2.8% were international students.

Whilst the percentage of international students at University of Plymouth was nearer 10%

Two-thirds of US International students with symptoms consistent with a mental health diagnosis do not receive services (Nordberg, Hayes, McAleavey, Castonguay and Locke, 2015)

**UKCISA (UK Council for
International Student
Affairs) funded research
in 2016**

Why do international
students not use university
wellbeing services?

Context: a literature of lacking

Much of the literature talked of international students in deficit terms, in terms of problems

International students **underutilise** university counselling services (Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Russell et al., 2008).

International students have **greater counselling needs** than home students (Nicolas et al., 2013; Raunic & Xenos, 2008)

“

▪ *Sometimes I even feel the local students don't really care about the foreign international students ... and I think it's really hard.*

▪ ***[An indifferent environment]***

(dis)connection with the host culture

– attempts to create connection

‘I tried to communicate with a few of the local British, the first problem I get is sometimes they just talk really, really fast and it’s really hard to try to catch up with them.’

‘It’s hard to find friends here. That’s the main reason why I joined some of these societies and I’ve tried to do my best on this.’

(dis)connection with the host culture
– attempts to create connection

**‘It’s not hard to find friends; it’s
hard to find British friends.’**

**‘Yeah I’m trying to find some
British friends.’**

Finding social connection - Other International students

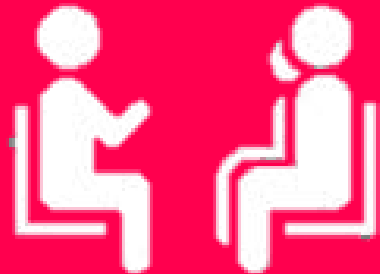
‘Yeah,[home students] make me feel embarrassed, so I tend to go along with other international students’

[Other international students] ‘We can understand each other and they don’t mind if I make a mistake.’

‘I just think other international students, they have the same problem as me, English is also their second language so they can understand me.’

**Belonging and identity
constructed from exclusion –
from being 'other'**

**‘What’s it all about?’
‘What exactly is
supporting, what
exactly?’**



COUNSELLING

- Many international students were unfamiliar with the notion of counselling.

| Feelings and thoughts about counselling

**“ *I think if I go there I
can’t explain exactly in
English, so I maybe
won’t go there.* ”**

“ *When I talk about reaching out I feel sort of bad, sort of inappropriate.* ”

**“ to say oh I have a
depression to show
your emotions like that,
[...]in our country it's
unreal**

There was a sense of stigma attached to going to counselling.

Students felt that if they went to counselling, they would be perceived by others as, **‘weird’; ‘strange’; ‘not normal’.**

“ It’s like a counselling service is our last choice, it’s our worst choice, sorry.

**Counselling is seen as
problematic.**

**An activity that could evoke
rejection from others**

- My research also exposed my own cultural arrogance in regarding international students' non-attendance as a problem to be solved.
- I realised that I had approached the research with an agenda, to increase international students take-up of counselling, without considering that the problem might lie with the notion of counselling rather than with the international students.

**Wellbeing is not about talking
(about wellbeing)**

**'Socialising with others
makes me feel happy'**

The research asked students how they supported themselves when they felt unhappy.

Students described using social activities with other international students to alleviate distress.

These social activities included:

'Cooking with my friends just makes me happy.'

'And when I'm getting maybe slightly unhappy I may join my friends to the pub or have some Pimms'

'Just go out with my flatmates, shopping'.

'Sometimes I go out to play football. It's a club or something, so we just go there to keep fit, sometimes we go to the gym'.

International student wellbeing –
active, informal, through
social activities with others

Counselling -
professional, formal
contemplative, in
private offices usually
in discreet campus
locations

| What happened next ...

Global Buddies.

The remit of this group is that
there is no remit – other than to
socialise together.

Why are counsellors good at facilitating Global Buddies?:

- constant time, staff member and place
- Working together, promoting agency within a supportive relationship
- No policies, no forms, encouragement to meet outside as a group
- Students knew the facilitator was a counsellor from the outset – tacit invitation to students to open up
- Special Times! 😊

Why Global Buddies important:

In facilitating this group we have taken ourselves as counsellors and our counselling skills from a private to a public, social arena

We have formed new kinds of relationships with students that they have perceived as valuable.



**Research is also
about an
orientation
towards
knowledge –
seeing the
familiar in new
ways**

- Information gathering from a wide variety of sources
- An openness to hearing the unexpected
- A willingness to be challenged and a willingness to change in the face of challenge

How has a research orientation helped me? The value of Little R.

Data, data, data – when we gather statistics about who uses our services, about increases in demand, about suicidality – this is Little R

When we read the available documents such as those produced by UUK, step change - this is Little R

When we benchmark what we do against other services, compare our waiting lists to those of IAPT – this is Little R

When we read articles and use the information – this is Little R

When we implement CIAO and show how students perceive our work to have helped them stay at university – this is Little R.

**Little R gives me voice, little R
gives me arguments.**

**Little R helps me move out of the counselling room and into
the economic arena.**

**In 2014 Little R helped me construct a business case to
successfully gain 2 additional Counsellors and 2 Mental
Health Advisors.**

Data, data, data.

**| Finally an ode to joy –
research can be fun!**

And what has engaging in research really taught me?

Hannah Arendt writes that understanding:

'...is a complicated process, which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.

Research has taught me about different forms of belonging and non belonging, it has shown me different realities and helped me to continue in my quest to build a safe space in my organisation. To try to be at home in the world.

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