

## **Everyone is doing it...why not you?**

*by Mary Paula Walsh and Dr. Arlene Egan*

'Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with purpose' Zora Neale Hurston

When we think about the purpose of psychotherapy, we may consider its value from the dual perspectives of client and therapist. For the client there is much evidence supporting the fact that therapy offers the client the opportunity to discover or clarify their purpose in life. Through the psychotherapeutic journey, clients have the opportunity to identify and understand the meaning their life holds, to solve problems which exist within their lives and to ultimately achieve a deeper understanding of themselves. Psychotherapy holds value for the therapist also (see Norcross, 2002). Therapists grow and also learn personal and professional value through their experiences of the psychotherapeutic journey. It has been cited in literature how the role of a psychotherapy creates a deeper sense of purpose in the therapist. However, literature also suggests that therapists should engage in a reflective process to ensure that the best service is being offered to each client (e.g., Stedmon & Dallos, 2009). According to research on reflective practices, the most effective way for therapists to begin thinking about the quality and value of the psychotherapy being offered to their clients is to ask questions of themselves. This is the essence of research. Asking questions is the first step in active engagement in research. Being curious, eager to ask questions and willing to pay attention to the answers you discover is the essence of building up knowledge of psychotherapeutic practices and experiences. This article aims to raise and dispel seven myths about research in psychotherapy, so that therapists may begin to become more open to the possibility about asking questions and sharing findings with the wider psychotherapeutic community.

As a society it can be suggested that we actively and regularly engage in research. If you have ever asked friends or family their opinions on product or service offerings, you are engaging in research. By asking others, you are creating a bank of information so that you might have the opportunity to make an informed choice based on the information that you have gathered. If you have ever found yourself searching for price comparisons on the internet to guide your choice of service provider, you are engaging in research. The use of the internet allows us to make choices based on an even greater pool of information. Research always begins with a question which will develop into a process of inquiry. This process encourages you to look outside your own breadth of knowledge and experience for information. This information may lead you to a deeper understanding of the issue or in some cases it can lead you to the answer. If you think about training courses you have participated in or even approaches to therapy that you use, what questions have been asked to ensure that these courses and approaches are up-to-date and relevant? Have you paid close attention to the questions you have been asking yourself? Even Freud documented his cases so that others could learn from and test the theories he posed about his clients and his approach.

From an Irish context, there is a dearth of research in psychotherapy and it is reasonable to suggest that the continuous development of psychotherapy in Ireland will benefit from a more explicit sharing of the knowledge and experiences of psychotherapists. As a means of encouraging thoughtfulness on this topic, we would like to dispel seven common myths that exist around research in psychotherapy.

### **Myth 1: Research is all about maths**

It is a common misconception that research into psychotherapeutic issues need to be quantifiable. This is not the case. The use of qualitative methods such as approaches relating to phenomenology, focus groups or case studies are regularly applied to research questions in psychotherapy. While some methods of qualitative research can be quantified, it is not a requirement of research in this area (see Atkinson & Heath, 1991; Yin, 1994).

### **Myth 2: The value of research in psychotherapy is less because no research with people is value free**

The nature of psychotherapy is one where personal interest and curiosity will often fuel the research in the first place. In relation to research in psychotherapy, a question that is often posed is; what is the point of research if objectivity cannot be assured? This particular issue is also a concern for psychological, sociological and even educational research. In any type of research on people being carried out by people, there will be subjectivity and bias. As these issues are component parts of research, we typically find that researchers manage them through open discourse on the types of limitations and challenges encountered in the work (see Feyerabend, 1994). It is also common for an open discussion on how subjectivity and bias were managed in each particular piece of work. This discussion is not designed to undermine the value of the research, but instead to provide ideas to other researchers on how to manage similar situations in the future.

### **Myth 3: Research has less value if it is qualitative in nature**

Over the past number of decades, psychological researchers have been debating the value of quantitative versus qualitative research. Part of the result of this debate has been the emergence of mixed methods approach to research, where we see a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to answer a particular research question. Despite the fact that there are proponents still sitting firmly on each side of the fence, it is best to suggest that the method used, quantitative, qualitative or mixed should be appropriate to the question being asked. We often find research in psychotherapy relates to clients, therapists or individuals' experiences, and for this a form of qualitative research is frequently a best fit (see McLeod & Lynch, 2000).

### **Myth 4: Some questions are not worth investigating**

It can be the case that psychotherapists may feel that the question they are interested in investigating is not worth thinking about in a research context. Perhaps the question is not grand enough? Perhaps the question is not clearly formulated? Or, perhaps the question is only relevant to a small sample of cases? The myth here surrounds the fact that you may believe that you are the only one interested in this question and in reality, this is seldom the case. In fact, if you have been thinking about this issue, somebody else has too, or, it is an issue that others should be thinking about. The true value of research in psychotherapy is that it can provide learning for other psychotherapists and in some cases it can provide the confidence to others to ask their own research questions.

### **Myth 5: Negotiating the ethics of research in psychotherapy is impossible**

Ethics have been established for all aspects of the psychotherapeutic process in order to protect both the therapist and the client. The same ethics are applied to research in psychotherapy. At the core of your process of inquiry there needs to be a consideration for the protection and dignity of your research participants. To learn more about how ethical considerations are managed in research in psychotherapy, previously published articles are a highly useful source of information. Having an awareness of what other psychotherapeutic researchers have learned through their experience of research is a powerful source of learning for any researcher. Of course, to increase awareness and understanding of ethical considerations specifically related to conducting research in psychotherapy in Ireland, take the time to consult the ethical guidelines outlined by the various psychotherapy membership groups.

### **Myth 6: My research is not my research – it has been investigated before**

The nature of psychotherapy is such that replication of research in this area will lead to new learnings and understandings of the topic. This is because it is common for research in psychotherapy to be conducted with a small sample or a specific cohort of individuals. In psychotherapeutic and psychological research, it is a sign of respect when the same research questions are asked by multiple researchers. In fact, this allows a deeper understanding of the topic to be shared with a wider community. To begin developing confidence in research, it is worth considering using a question and replicating an inquiry process that has been employed by another researcher. The results that you report will support, refute or add to the findings that have been reported previously and overall learning of in the area will be enhanced.

### **Myth 7: I can't do research, I am not an academic**

Earlier in this article we suggested that you may engage in some level of research in your daily life. If you reflected on the types of questions that you ask, the manner in which you set about to find the answers and what you do with the information you gather, you would realise that you may know more about research skills and dispositions than you think. The skills required for conducting research centre on curiosity, the ability to ask questions, the patience to formulate a plan of enquiry that is ethically sound and the willingness to pay attention to the results. Research is a skill, which if practiced will improve. Of course good research, is more than working off your own experience and ideas, it is also about learning from those who have conducted and shared their findings and experiences.

Overall, the professionalism surrounding psychotherapy in Ireland cannot be disputed. Through the hosting of conference events, the publication of journals and even the establishment of various psychotherapy specialisation groups this level is ever increasing. Imagine if psychotherapists could share their ideas, experiences and learnings with the wider community, the value of psychotherapy in this country would grow even more. This article was designed to invite psychotherapists to stay with the questions they are thinking about and seeking answers to. It is the recognition of these questions that is the first step to research in psychotherapy. It has recently been suggested that 'good research has three essential and challenging characteristics:

1. Scrupulous testing of hypotheses by evidence

2. Openness to public assessment of results
3. Readiness to revise or abandon theories in light of new or better data' (Loewenthal & Winter, 2006:5)

To conclude, why not consider “doing it”, not everybody is, but “it could be you”!

### **References.**

- Atkinson, B., & Heath, A. (1991). 'Qualitative Research and Legitimization of Knowledge'. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 17: 161-165.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Feyerabend, P. (1994). *Against Method*. London: Verso.
- Kimmel, A. (1988). *Ethics and Value in Applied Social Science*. Applied Social Science Methods Series, Vol 12, Sage Publications.
- Loewenthal, D., & Winter. (2006). *What is Psychotherapeutic Research? (eds)*. London: H. Karnac Ltd.
- McLeod J., & Lynch G. (2000). 'This is Our Life: Strong Evaluation in Psychotherapy Narrative'. *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health*, 3(33): 389-406.
- Meyer, C.B. (2001). 'A Case Study in Methodology'. *Field Methods*, 13(4): 329-352.
- Norcross, J. (2002). *Psychotherapy Relationships that Work*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Stedmon, J., & Dallos, R. (2009). *Reflective Practice in Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.