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PERSPECTIVE

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The role of BACP in maximising the potential of counselling and psychological therapies research in the UK: Benefitting clients, communities, and societies

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Abstract

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is the largest professional membership body within the field of counselling and psychological therapies in the UK, but there is a mismatch between its membership of >65,000 and its research impact. This article sets out a potential strategic direction as considered by an informal grouping of researchers and teachers in the field. Actionable research plans are outlined at three levels: client–practitioner, local communities, and societies. At the client–practitioner level, data-informed practice can be readily implemented as a therapeutic aid akin to supervision, providing the potential for integrating research into everyday practice. At the community level, interdisciplinary collaborations together with a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusiveness are paths to building a community of researchers and citizens that includes marginalised populations. The importance of social justice extends to the societal level, connecting with politics at a micro and macro level, and engaging internationally to respond to actual threats (e.g., climate change). Across these three levels, high value is placed on data with its potential for informing and improving practice, but also enhancing the lives of people in communities and societies. Overall, research strategies need to be collaborative (i.e., collegial) and less singular (i.e., individually project-based), developing cumulative knowledge around specific topics via a 'capture and build' strategy for small projects with strategic oversight by BACP. Clarity of research strategy combined with collaborative and collective action from BACP and leaders in the field can help realise the full potential of BACP's research capacity.

KEYWORDS
collaborative research, data-informed practice, datasets, equality, diversity, and inclusiveness, marginalised populations, research impact

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In the UK, the spectrum of therapeutic practice and research is mainly captured by four key national professional/societal bodies: the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP), the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), the UK Chapter of the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR-UK), and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The range of research topics, methodologies, philosophies, and epistemologies in counselling and the psychological therapies is extensive and reflects the richness and diversity of the field that is far beyond the scope of a single article. The focus of this article is on the latter organisation (i.e., BACP) for three reasons. First, of the named organisations, BACP has the largest membership (>65,000) and therefore a unique potential for contributing to research in the field. Second, this journal, as the *research* journal of BACP, is an appropriate platform to initiate and facilitate such a debate on this topic. Third, akin to BACP and UKCP, as a membership organisation with training accreditation as a key component, it needs to be able to harness and engage members in establishing research as a bedrock of training and practice. Hence, although this article focuses on issues of research in relation to all members of BACP, in whatever role they fulfil within or outside the organisation, many of the issues raised have a wider reach both nationally and internationally and will therefore have relevance beyond BACP.

In this context, the current article sets out the perspectives of a number of academics, researchers, teachers, and practitioners regarding the potential foci, direction, and resources available for research in counselling and related fields, and the role of BACP in enhancing its impact in research, specifically in the domain of counselling.[1] The authors were mindful of the existence of the revised BACP research strategy (2021a; https://rb.gy/m87c6a) but felt there was merit in writing and disseminating a collective perspective as individuals independent—but supportive—of the organisation. This was conducted in the knowledge that the space counselling research occupies is liminal (i.e., in a place of transition) and lacks status in comparison with mainstream psychological therapies research, as well as that of the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. The article is, therefore, a starting point for moving forwards within the organisation, its members, and the broader profession in the UK and beyond.

Implications for practice

- Initiate data-informed practice and build research datasets comprising quantitative and qualitative material.
- Encourage interdisciplinary collaborations within and across institutions and professions.
- Prioritise actively engaging and learning with marginalised populations, being mindful of equality, diversity, and inclusiveness, and working with groups including experts by experience to help set a social justice agenda.
- Implement a 'capture and build' approach with student projects selected on the basis of strategic fit and impact rather than student personal curiosity alone.
- Adopt and adapt a research impact model informed by the UK's Research Excellence Framework exercise (i.e., foundational science → application → documented impact).

Implications for policy

- Valuing and promoting research literacy at all levels of counselling training, together with oversight of all small-scale research, can help maximise the research potential of BACP if combined with clear leadership, a focus on practice-based impact and targeting the concerns of individuals, communities, and societies. The combined results will heighten the research profile of BACP and hence that of counselling and psychological therapies.

2 | CONSTRAINING FACTORS IN UK COUNSELLING RESEARCH

While, within the UK, there are a small number of research-active Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the field of counselling and psychological therapies, these are often seen to be detached and relatively inaccessible to the majority of counsellors wishing to engage in or learn from research. The consequence is that a large proportion of research activity by counsellors is conducted individually, both in its focus and institutional implementation. This means that for both students and academics, the focus tends to be on small-scale research, leading to outputs that are largely driven by the need to satisfy professional qualifications. Indeed, small-scale research is the very format proposed in the BACP (2021a) research strategy. However, as a rule, these do not yield research that is impactful. Nor is it cumulative in building a body of robust knowledge for the field and of generalisable benefit to clients and society at a local, national, or international level. In terms of resources, given that one of the key strengths of the organisation is the size of its membership, there is a gulf between its human capital and research impact.

While there is a continuing professional commitment to research via a major annual platform (i.e., the BACP Research Conference), such a forum can only reflect current activity, resulting in the perception of limited progress or impact. Set against this backdrop, we suggest avenues that might lead BACP and UK counselling research towards a clearer focus regarding strategic research activities and potential impact but that will require enhanced partnership working with all stakeholders. In doing so, we have addressed various issues along a continuum starting with individuals (clients and practitioners) and progressing towards the wider contexts of local communities and, ultimately, societies.

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3 | ACTIONABLE RESEARCH AND PLURALISTIC METHODS: CLIENTS AND PRACTITIONERS

A challenge for counselling research is to define its scope and commit to a scientific model in which data, in whatever form it is sampled, is the valued currency for informing good practice. Espousing models of therapy as generic interventions, irrespective of existing or emerging data that suggest limitations, will not enable counselling as a profession to claim itself to be evidence-based. Research focusing on theoretical models would benefit from addressing Gordon Paul's (1967) litany: 'What treatment, by whom, is most effective for this individual with that specific problem, and under which set of circumstances?' (p. 111). This litany places the needs of an individual client first and does not adhere to a single, specific therapeutic modality. Accordingly, research focusing on therapy modalities needs to determine under what circumstances offering a specific therapy is the best option. For example, the original focus of the PRaCTICED trial (see Barkham et al., 2021) was to compare the outcomes of differing therapy modalities in order to address a lack of evidence in non-CBT therapies in informing the revised NICE depression guidelines (NICE, 2022a). Subsequently, the focus has moved to re-analysing such data to determine, based on a range of client characteristics, the impact when clients receive their optimally matched treatment as compared with when they do not (Moggia et al., 2023). This reflects the increasing moves in current psychological therapies research towards matching clients to the best-fitting therapy modality for a given client rather than making clients fit a single model.

Such an agenda can be extended into the current adoption of a pluralistic approach, which has garnered much interest in the field of counselling (see Smith et al., 2021). But it behoves those practitioners adopting this modality to ensure there is a body of evidence supporting the within-therapy/counselling decisions taken in each session (see Cooper & McLeod, 2007). As such, counselling research should have the broadest and most inclusive approach to the definition of data, placing equal weight on contrasting and complementary methodologies. The kinds of data gathered through research enquiry are broad, from effectiveness and outcomes, to experiences and client reports, and the range of questions that can be asked of data can encompass all aspects of therapeutic practice. A feature of counselling research should be understanding and valuing all methodologies but promoting lesser documented approaches so as to enrich the research landscape.

In relation to BACP's commitment to 'small-scale' research (BACP Research Strategy, 2021a), there needs to be a 'capture and build' approach by BACP via networking between researchers and providing strategic oversight of such studies, whereby they can be combined into building a collective evidence-base. Small-scale research can be a building block contributing to the foundational scientific research within any HEI in generating an impact case study for the Research Excellence Framework (REF2029) exercise, the UK's procedure for assessing the quality of research conducted by HEIs (https://www.ref.ac.uk/). In this context, the resource of a highly motivated and committed student, supported by good leadership, provides a considerable asset. Such an approach can be developed further, akin to that adopted by Cooper in conducting four successive small randomised controlled trials over many years as precursors to underpin the successful bid for an ESRC-funded trial of school-based humanistic counselling supported by eight organisations including BACP (Cooper et al., 2021). This cumulative approach to research is endorsed by Cumming (2014), who provides informative guidelines on improving psychological research. For both the REF2029 exercise and a cumulative approach to research, small-scale research is purposeful because it has a role as part of a larger strategic plan. The problem lies when small-scale research is individually implemented and strategically isolated.

Linking research to practice via the dual role of counsellor-researcher, regardless of method or modality, is crucial (see Fleet et al., 2016). In such a context, counselling practice without evaluation should be eschewed and localised practice datasets need to be developed, consistent with the paradigm of practice-based evidence. This needs to be embedded into the core structures and processes of BACP and the counselling profession, from course accreditation and training onwards. BACP does have a guide for course accreditation (BACP, 2021b) that makes reference to research within various sections, but only a single-headed section on research specifically relates to the small-scale research project (https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/11877/bacp-gold-book-accreditation-of-training-courses-incl-core-curriculum-plus-opt-criteria-may21.docx). But research needs to be embedded in all components of accreditation from the start. For example, it is no longer sufficient nor ethical for programmes to teach counselling on the basis of Carl Rogers's (1957) 'core conditions', without reference to the latest research on these—and other—predictors of therapy outcomes. See, for example, the recent meta-analysis showing no relationship between empathic reflections, by themselves, and effectiveness with clients (Elliott et al., 2023).

An initial step in securing such data can be achieved via routine outcome monitoring (ROM; for a practitioner guide, see De Jong et al., 2023) and an easy entry point could be by taking up an initiative within the European chapter of SPR whereby some clinics are adopting a free-to-use single-item measure that enables low-tech data collection at each session as an aid to clinical practice and, subsequently, potential research (Gonçalves et al., 2024). While at the level of a single practitioner, this produces a relatively small amount of data, it could readily become a source of evidence for individual practices—data-informed practice—and then progress into a living dataset. The combination of simple data and large membership within BACP has the potential for yielding a substantial dataset that would serve individual members, the organisation, and the wider scientific community. There is, then, no need for translating findings to practice settings or invoking principles of implementation science as the research is already embedded in routine practice.

From such a starting point, a strategic approach needs to be adopted that builds on existing client-focused research; for example, see Cooper's (2023) multi-layered approach entitled *Using Research*

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Evidence to Predict and Optimise Therapeutic Benefit. Quantitative methodologies currently have political and policy impact and counselling research needs to attend to that reality (see Cooper & Reeves, 2012) while also arguing for a broader and more inclusive evidence-base within traditional assessments of evidence (Barkham et al., 2017).

However, research is a bidirectional process: it needs to be generated and also digested from the very beginning of *any* counselling programme at whatever level. At an organisational level, this follows the model of a learning health system in which 'evidence is both generated and applied as a natural product of the care process' (Ramsberg & Platt, 2017). But this principle can also be adopted by individual practitioners: collecting and learning from their own practice data, as well as learning from the external research literature. Hence, irrespective of any methodological approach, practitioners need to be able to access and be continual recipients of research as a sounding board for their practice, akin to supervision.

Evidence is not static and unless practitioners can regularly access and update their knowledge base, they are open to practising, at best, on out-of-date evidence or no evidence at all. In addition, although counselling places great store by generating reflexive content, such a focus fuels the introspective lens of counselling research and detracts from focusing outwards towards better matching of clients' needs with the available evidence-based interventions. Moreover, an emphasis on the position of the researcher risks minimising those aspects of research more directly relevant to the subjects of counselling: that is, the clients whose needs should be prioritised.

Research needs to be synthesised in ways that are actionable by practitioners, with direct benefit to their daily practice and that of their clients. Greater effort could focus on translating existing research into practice rather than generating research for its own sake. Generating evidence within the paradigm of practice-based evidence, utilising open-access publications to aid practitioners' access to research, and moving towards the collection of real-world data and real-world evidence (NICE, 2022b) is where the future vision for integrating research and practice lies. This will extend counselling research beyond the confines of clients and practitioners and into the wider realms of communities and societies.

4 | DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND CITIZENS: EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSIVENESS

A key starting point for moving counselling research forward is to achieve greater clarity regarding the aims of research at each level of training. In this respect, a major focus on students' individualised project work should centre on engaging them with a critical understanding of research and its methods (see McLeod, 2017). This would include challenging the introspective, solitary, small-scaled and often siloed nature of many of its activities and reaching towards strategic and impactful research, whatever its size. Potential progress can be achieved by a higher-level direction and a focus on engagement involving collaboration across the discipline, and also with other professionals, with a focus on collective action for social justice. Interdisciplinary collaboration, in particular, will challenge methodological assumptions and broaden the scope of research. Accordingly, counselling research as a single entity will rarely hold the complete answer, particularly as it moves into more social settings relating to, for example, cost of living, isolation, loneliness, and ageing. Broadening the lens of research requires consideration of social justice, as well as ways in which mental health and well-being are being conceptualised and evaluated.

In order to open up counselling research to shared ambition and collaboration, there needs to be support for the collective view that equality, diversity, and inclusiveness have to be front and centre in the activities undertaken: that people who are or feel themselves to be marginalised are, indeed, included. This principle should begin at the foundational level of research training, and awareness and guidance on moving beyond a Western or Northern hemisphere dominated framework regarding research curricula and methods is crucial (see Charura & Lago, 2021).

A further priority is the need for research to focus on social determinants of mental health as identified in four main areas: basic needs (e.g., homelessness); physical environment (e.g., adverse features of the built environment, including climate change); societal problems (e.g., discrimination); and socioeconomic status (e.g., poverty; see Compton & Shim, 2020). Researching the impact of these factors and designing interdisciplinary collaborations that help to support addressing these issues needs to be progressed. As such, community-based participatory research, allied with 'cultural humility', is a worthwhile consideration and a means of developing partnerships with local communities (Pester et al., 2023).

While these examples illustrate how research can create relevant foci, we also need to consider how researchers undertake their collective work. A key component for future research requires utilising existing expertise by academics and maximising the collective effort of graduate students. The latter are a considerable resource whose work is typically not channelled strategically to meet national or front-line needs. Research has to be responsive to perceived and anticipated needs in order to ensure utility—hence the focus on actionable research. The use of digital communication (Zoom/Google Meet) to connect research groups and centres to brainstorm research methods and access to funding rather than working in silos is a rewarding process that can yield practical change (e.g., see the Student Counselling Outcomes Research and Evaluation [SCORE] Consortium: https://rb.gy/6fjvz1).

The role of leadership to aid coordination and communication of efforts should be shared and supported by the research community and the profession more broadly, but also through enhanced outreach work from those who undertake research and

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the communities they serve. The further development of research centres located within HEIs where counselling and psychological therapies research are already established would help gain critical mass around key research themes. In addition, it would clearly communicate research intention on behalf of those HEIs so that students and researchers alike could make informed decisions about their own research focus and planning. BACP could hold an important role in the implementation and communication of those centres to the wider psychological therapies field and beyond. Bridging the gap between HEIs who train counsellors and local communities by hosting or supporting research-active counselling services is a well-established way to create more relevant and impactful opportunities for education and research. Alongside this, it can provide a valued service to the local community (e.g., see the Training, Research and Counselling Clinics [TRACCs] initiative; https://traccs.uk/).

Within this strategy, the implications for measuring outcomes could become radically different from the existing focus on individuals and single symptom measures (e.g., depression). There have been welcomed moves towards developing individual-focused measures that are more congruent with counselling values (Stephen & Elliott, 2022), and also key contributions signalling the value and potential of idiographic measures (Sales et al., 2023), which give access to the personal meanings of individuals. Utilising both nomothetic and idiographic measures is likely to give a more rounded approach to data capture. But, counselling research needs to go beyond the standard battery of measures and look towards focusing on a sense of belonging and community. The emphasis then shifts towards issues on a larger scale that affect numerous people. These concerns may be existential and pervasive in relation to the social context within which people live.

5 | SOCIETAL AND INTERNATIONAL IMPACT: PRIORITISING SOCIAL DETERMINANTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Beyond local communities, there are geo-socio-political and environmental challenges that impact the well-being of all people, examples being pandemics, wars and the presence of climate change. In effect, these are the topics that challenge humanity and thereby provide the basis for international research collaboration. Underpinning all such topics is the need for counselling research to be prioritising work relevant to the social and global determinants of mental well-being. A current review established the heightened vulnerability of marginalised people to the impacts of multiple intersecting social risk factors (Kirkbride et al., 2024). And in response, the review concluded that the priority recommendation was to make social justice central to all public mental health interventions. Accordingly, counselling researchers need to be effective in engaging with politics at both micro and macro levels to inform and lobby for effective change to social policies that impact the mental health of individuals at a national level. In effect, researchers have a social voice that needs to address social justice.

Key areas for research in an ever-changing world might include, but not be restricted to, the following:

- The technological transformation being undertaken, asking how practitioners best adapt their practice to using technologies (e.g., see the critical review of video counselling, Smith et al., 2022); or increasing their reach to meet the needs of all those seeking help, and attuning to the impact—threat and potential—of AI (see Prescott & Hanley, 2023).
- Examining the effect of displacement and conflict within international communities; for example, those impacted by climate change, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and their impact, which present challenges to traditional research methodologies but also opportunities for progressing research methods beyond those currently based wholly within a Western framework.
- The impact of pandemics (e.g., COVID; Vostanis & Bell, 2020) and the global reality of climate change (e.g., eco-anxiety; Silva & Coburn, 2023), which require an acknowledgement of existential threat to humanity and a broader approach to addressing psychological well-being and the recognition that the future for our children is uncertain.

These topics provide the opportunity for both connections and collaborations at a national and international level across the disciplines of counselling and psychological therapies, with the aim of achieving impact. Adopting and adapting procedures to be used in the REF2029 exercise with particular reference to generating impact case studies could be beneficial and better align BACP strategies with those of UK HEIs. A searchable resource showing all impact case studies submitted for the previous REF2021 is available (see https://rb.gy/s1u2e5). These are concise summaries comprising the foundational scientific research that the researcher has conducted, its application, and the evidence-based impact arising from such research. One corollary of impact is that research is potentially scalable in meaningful ways, and thus creates changes to practice and, ultimately, to societal well-being.

6 | CONCLUSION

Counselling and psychological therapies research in the UK has the potential to make significant impacts at individual, community, and societal levels. Actualising that potential, however, requires research to be embedded within all professional and practice training programmes from the start. The paradigm of practice-based evidence provides a framework, whereby each individual BACP practitioner member, and others, can learn from their own naturally occurring data as well as from the wider research literature. For too long, research has been viewed as a separate and secondary activity. BACP's

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promotion of research as a central hallmark of counselling training is essential. What is also needed is acceptance by practitioners that the combination of their own data and the wider research literature produces the richest possible learning environment, leading to better and best practice to the benefit of clients, communities, and society at large.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors, except MB, are members of BACP. MB has received research funding from BACP prior to 2019; a previous member of BACP Research Committee (2014–2019), BACP Scientific Committee (2014–2016) and CPR Editorial Board (2009–2020). DC is a current member of CPR Editorial Board; on BACP's Grants Peer Review Panel (GPRP); and a recipient of research funding for PhD candidates; MC has received fees from BACP for writing. LG has had, since 2019, volunteer roles as Chair, BACP Ethics and Good Practice Committee; President, BACP (current); and Expert consultant to Ethical Framework review process; and no paid roles in BACP. TH is a current member of CPR Editorial Board. JMc was the founding editor of CPR but has no additional declarations to make. NM is currently a member of the BACP Research Committee (since 2022) and in 2023 was Chair of the BACP Research Grants Committee. She has received small fees for some work. She worked (part-time) as BACP Joint Head of Research (2016–2018; paid role) and (subsequently), a paid Research Consultant (2018–2020) for BACP. AR was a previous Editor of CPR and Chair of BACP (until November 2019); External Consultant to the Ethical Framework (Sept 2023 to date); and Principal Researcher on a research project with BACP Coaching Division and BACP Research Department (February 2024 to date). KS was a BACP trustee and member of the Board (November 2020 to October 2023) and Research CIommittee chair (September 2021 to October 2023), and previously a member of CPR Editorial Board.

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ENDNOTE

[1]The authors do not represent any formal or collective body and the views expressed in the article capture a range of issues raised between them and deemed to be important to all but within which individual authors differ in the emphasis placed on them. The article was authored independently of the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* Editorial Board, although DC and TH were, at the time of writing, Editorial Board members. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors alone and should not be viewed as representing a generally agreed policy of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), its Research Board, or the Editorial Board of *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*.

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