Introducing the
Scottish Voluntary Sector
Counselling Practice Research Network

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Voluntary sector counselling agencies make a significant and vital contribution to the overall balance of provision of psychological therapies in Scotland. Yet, despite the importance of the voluntary sector and the fact that so much counselling is being delivered by counsellors in voluntary agencies to a diverse range of client groups, it is striking that so little research has been published related to this area of practice. When one considers the richness and role of the voluntary sector in society in general, and the diversity of issues and challenges that voluntary sector counselling agencies have to deal with in particular, one might expect that this area of practice would be a major topic of interest for research. Not so – at least to date.

Research into voluntary sector counselling is important for a number of reasons. First, in an increasingly evidence-based healthcare environment it is important to be able to demonstrate that counselling is actually working and worthwhile in order to obtain ongoing funding to ensure availability and access to voluntary sector counselling services. Second, findings from research can inform initiatives to improve practice, training and the support and supervision of counsellors. Third, there is tremendous potential for research into voluntary sector counselling to build our theoretical understanding of factors associated with effective practice and effective practitioners. Finally, research can help to document the contribution of voluntary sector counselling to Scottish society.

In this article, I would like to introduce the recently established Scottish Voluntary Sector Counselling Practice Research Network (SVSC PRN), which aims to facilitate research into voluntary sector counselling in Scotland. I will start by saying something about the idea behind practice research networks before going on to provide some information on the background and rationale underpinning the SVSC PRN, as well as describing its research agenda. To conclude, I will offer some thoughts on the potential of the network and challenges it is likely to face.

What is a PRN?

A PRN is a network of practitioners that work together to conduct research to inform their day-to-day practice (Audin et al., 2001). The PRN acts as an infrastructure for collaboration between counsellors and researchers, with the emphasis is on conducting research that is practice-based, relevant and meaningful to counsellors' everyday work. PRNs originated as basic recording systems for morbidity rates in primary medical care settings and are now established in mental health and psychological therapy services in the UK and other countries as well (Barkham, Hardy, & Mellor-Clark, 2010; McMillen, Lenze, Hawley, & Osborne, 2009).

Two prominent examples of UK based PRNs are the Supervision Practice Research Network (SuPReNet), and the Schools-based Counselling Practice Research Network (SCoPReNet) – see www.bacp.co.uk for further details. A well known and documented PRN in psychological therapies in the USA is the Pennsylvania Practice Research Network (Borkovec, Echemendia, Ragusea, & Ruiz, 2001), which focuses primarily on conducting research into the effectiveness of therapy.

A common feature of all PRNs is that the research studies are relevant to practice and derived from close collaboration between counsellors and researchers. Typically, an academic centre provides the infrastructure to maintain the network, but also the methodological expertise to carry out the research in partnership with practitioner network members.

The SVSC PRN

The SVSC PRN is a collaborative pilot project funded and supported by the University of Abertay, Dundee and COSCA. At the time of writing, resources and support for the network was available for one calendar year, commencing April 2011, and covering, among other things, the development of a website and production of a quarterly newsletter, staff costs to cover co-ordination duties associated with its activities and time to begin to implement its research agenda.

The SVSC PRN was conceived at the 7th COSCA Annual Research Dialogue, held in Stirling in November 2010. A key theme of this meeting was the need for researchers, counsellors and other relevant stakeholders to work together to create research networks that would help to build an evidence base for counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland (McLeod, 2010). While the question of effectiveness is undoubtedly important, it is also important that research into a range of topics concerning voluntary sector counselling is undertaken so that a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and scope of this complex area of practice can be documented and discussed.

Inspired by the presentations and debates at the 2010 COSCA Research Dialogue the idea of establishing the SVSC PRN was born. After some 18 months of collaborative planning between the University of Abertay and COSCA, and consultation with representatives of voluntary sector counselling agencies, the SVSC PRN is now underway. The aims and objectives of this project are outlined below.

Aims and objectives

The SVSC PRN aims to enhance understanding and practice of voluntary sector counselling in Scotland. It seeks to pursue a research agenda that is generated and shaped by the concerns of the Scottish voluntary sector counselling community and derived from issues that emerge from routine counselling practice within voluntary organisations.

A primary function of the network, therefore, is to facilitate collaboration between practitioners and researchers in order to generate knowledge from practice-based research that is meaningful to individual practitioners, counselling agencies and other stakeholder groups with an interest in voluntary sector counselling in Scotland. To realise its aims the SVSC PRN has identified a set of objectives for the pilot period of its operation, which are:

1. To identify and prioritise a set of research questions on voluntary sector counselling in Scotland.

2. To design and make available research protocols to facilitate the implementation of the research agenda. For example, by providing step-by-step guides on how to carry out particular kinds of research studies, such as the evaluation of counselling outcomes.

3. To support voluntary counselling agencies, practitioners, professional and other umbrella bodies in carrying out research that enhances understanding of voluntary sector counselling in Scotland, and generates findings with clear practical implications for counselling practice and policy initiatives.

4. To identify and disseminate information about sources of funding for research grants.

5. To foster partnerships and collaboration opportunities between service managers, practitioners, voluntary organisations, professional bodies, researchers, and academics, as well as other stakeholder groups associated with voluntary sector counselling in Scotland.

6. To make a contribution to advancing the development of voluntary sector counselling in Scotland.

Organisation of the network

The network is organised in a way that allows interested practitioners to get involved according to their interests and availability. This might, for example, range from registering to receive information through a newsletter on the one hand to active engagement in carrying out research studies on the other. At present, I am fulfilling the role of Director of the network, which involves taking the lead in establishing the network and co-ordinating its activities. My own interest in voluntary sector counselling stems from my experience of developing and managing a voluntary sector counselling service in Scotland for people with mental health problems, and from conducting research into this service for my masters and doctoral studies (Armstrong, 2003; 2010).

Advisory Group

An advisory group is also in place comprising representatives from COSCA and the University of Abertay. We are currently seeking other individuals to join the Advisory Group to ensure it adequately reflects a range of skills and areas of expertise related to the business of the network. For example, counselling practitioners, trainers and supervisors, researchers, individuals with fund raising and grant-making experience, as well as individuals with knowledge of policy making and public awareness campaigns.

Resources

A website for the network is currently under construction and is expected to be online in early autumn 2012. We will also produce a quarterly newsletter which will be available to download from the website. Both the website and the newsletter are being developed to promote and disseminate information about the network

and its activities, and importantly, to facilitate communication among members and create opportunities to get involved in research related to their practice.

Membership

An inclusive approach is being taken to membership of the network. Joining is free of charge and open to anyone with an interest in voluntary sector counselling in Scotland. To get involved or find our more about the network simply contact Dr Joe Armstrong via email at the address above. In the future, it will be possible to register online via our website.

Current and future research directions

Some research is already being planned to learn more about how we might help counsellors themselves engage in research, to investigate clients' experiences and outcomes of voluntary sector counselling, and a review of the literature is underway to map out what research has already been carried out in this area. Initial feedback from a preliminary and informal consultation with a number of voluntary sector counselling practitioners suggests that key topics for research might include studies that: investigate client expectations and reasons for seeking counselling; the effectiveness of counselling; client perceptions of helpful and unhelpful aspects of counselling; issues related to the personal and professional development of volunteer counsellors; patterns of volunteering and engagement with voluntary sector counselling; contemporary practice issues such as the impact of the current economic crisis on this area of practice; and research that attempts to document the historical origins and impact of voluntary sector counselling on Scottish society more generally. This list is not exhaustive, but it does show the breath of research topics that could be investigated.

Challenges

There are significant challenges inherent in establishing and maintaining a PRN. Chief among these are issues related to engaging and sustaining practitioner involvement. Other challenges include difficu lties associated managing relationships and communication among network members, carrying out and publishing collaborative studies, developing and implementing a coherent research strategy, and securing funding for ongoing infrastructure and management support to maintain the network

We have attempted to learn from the experiences of other successful PRNs and organised the SVSC PRN in a way that we hope will enable us to navigate successful these challenges. Of course, this remains to be seen and I look forward to reporting on our progress in this journal in the future.

Conclusion

Overall, a research-informed understanding of Scottish voluntary sector counselling is patchy and needs to be developed. The establishment of the SVSC PRN, therefore, is an important and exciting venture for voluntary sector counselling in Scotland. It has the potential to foster active partnerships and collaboration opportunities between practitioners and researchers and thus mobilise a truly practice-oriented research agenda for counselling offered by voluntary sector organisations in Scotland. The SVSC PRN has the potential to garner interest and involvement in such research through the provision of a practitioner-friendly infrastructure and support mechanisms. Indeed, it could be argued that the most viable way of enhancing the future development of voluntary sector counselling in Scotland is through a PRN such as the Scottish Voluntary Sector Counselling Practice Research Network.

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