

Professional Knowledge

Professional knowledge refers to what practitioners learn through their professional work, for instance around effective strategies for helping different client groups and presenting problems, and the challenges and satisfactions associated with using different therapy approaches.

Professional knowledge research consists of studies that seek to document and analyse experiences and insights around the process of therapy, arising from practice as a counsellor or psychotherapist. Such studies make an important contribution to the overall research literature by providing a perspective that acts as a supplement and counterbalance to research that adopts an external-observer standpoint, for instance through collecting data using standardised measures.

Professional knowledge research draws on a range of methodologies, including interviews, surveys, case studies, autoethnography, autobiography, and descriptive first-person accounts of practice. A detailed analysis of the pros and cons of different approaches to conducting professional knowledge research, can be found in:

McLeod, J. (2022) *Doing Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 4th edition. London: Sage. Chapter 11 and additional useful resources are available on the companion website for this book: <https://study.sagepub.com/doingresearch4e>

It can be helpful when thinking about the professional knowledge of counsellors and psychotherapists to adopt a developmental perspective: different themes, insights and challenges are associated with being a trainee, novice practitioner, mid-career practitioners, and expert/senior practitioners. For example, trainees may be acutely aware of aspects of practice that more experienced colleagues take for granted (and do not mention in interviews). Senior practitioners may offer valuable clinical *wisdom* arising from decades of grappling with therapy dilemmas.

Why is professional knowledge useful?

In the course of their professional work with clients, a counsellor or psychotherapist will develop a rich practical understanding of how to handle particular issues and respond effectively to the needs of different client groups. Members of all occupational groups tend to build up informal learning and support networks, where they connect up with colleagues to share stories about good practice, how to deal with things that go wrong, and similar issues. Such networks have been described by sociologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as *communities of practice*. A community of practice refers to everyday 'situated learning', outside of classrooms, colleges and universities, through which people in a particular line of work share their experience in order to develop a broader understanding of issues and strategies related to their job. Communities of practice can develop organically and informally, or may be organised around a formal structure, either within an organisation or using social media.

One of the benefits of being part of a community of practice is that the practitioner can build up what John Gabbay and Andrée le May have described as *clinical mindlines*: internalised mental maps of various knowledge sources and network members whose knowledge and

wisdom can be drawn on (either cognitively, by recalling information and stories they have shared, or in person by emailing or phoning them) when making clinical judgements.

One of the key characteristics of being able to *think like a therapist* is an ability to use clinical mindlines to think ahead, and anticipate consequences of actions, when working with a client.

For the most part, the communities of practice and mindlines that are available to therapists mainly consist of people with whom they are in direct contact. However, reading professional knowledge studies can have the effect of supporting, augmenting and broadening these capabilities.

Lave, J. & Wenger E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Gabbay, J. & le May, E. (2011). *Practice-based evidence for health care: clinical mindlines*. London: Routledge.

Gabbay, J. and Le May, A. (eds.) (2022) *Knowledge Transformation in Health and Social Care: Putting Mindlines to Work*. London: Routledge.

Professional knowledge studies

Many research studies have been published in which therapists have been interviewed or surveyed about their experience of working with specific issues and client groups. However, the term ‘professional knowledge’ has rarely been used to tag this genre of research, with the result that it can be hard to track down such studies. However, in you develop the habit of striving to be a research-informed practitioner who scans journals for potentially interesting and relevant articles, you will regularly come across such studies. Examples of professional knowledge studies and reports are listed below.

Adame, A. L. (2019). “Present through it all”: a qualitative exploration of psychotherapy and psychosis. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 59(6), 859-876.

Aherne, C., Coughlan, B., & Surgenor, P. (2018). Therapists’ perspectives on suicide: a conceptual model of connectedness. *Psychotherapy Research*, 28(5), 803-819.

Asfeldt, M., & Beames, S. (2017). Trusting the journey: embracing the unpredictable and difficult to measure nature of wilderness educational expeditions. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 40(1), 72–86.

Baima, T., & Sude, M. E. (2020). What white mental health professionals need to understand about whiteness: A Delphi study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 46(1), 62-80.

Basset, F. (2022) Exploring whiteness in the context of anti-racist practice: a mixed methods survey. *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, 12, 47–63.

Bayne, H. B., & Branco, S. F. (2018). A phenomenological inquiry into counselor of color broaching experiences. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 96(1), 75-85.

Beel, N., Brownlow, C., Jeffries, C., & du Preez, J. (2020). Counseling men: treatment recommendations from Australian men's therapists. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 28(1), 101-121.

Bimont, D., & Werbart, A. (2018). "I've got you under my skin": Relational therapists' experiences of patients who occupy their inner world. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 31(2), 243-268.

Bowlby, C. G., Anderson, T. L., Hall, M. E. L., & Willingham, M. M. (2015). Recovered professionals exploring eating disorder recovery: A qualitative investigation of meaning. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 43(1), 1-10.

Brattland, H., Høiseth, J. R., Burkeland, O., Inderhaug, T. S., Binder, P. E., & Iversen, V. C. (2018). Learning from clients: A qualitative investigation of psychotherapists' reactions to negative verbal feedback. *Psychotherapy Research*, 28(4), 545-559.

de Vos, J.A., Netten, C. & Noordenbos, G. (2016). Recovered eating disorder therapists using their experiential knowledge in therapy: A qualitative examination of the therapists' and the patients' view. *Eating Disorders*, 24(3), 207-223.

Geller, S. M., & Greenberg, L. S. (2002). Therapeutic Presence: therapists' experience of presence in the psychotherapy encounter. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 1(1-2), 71-86.

Goldfried, M. R. (2011). Generating research questions from clinical experience: Therapists' experiences in using CBT for panic disorder. *The Behavior Therapist*, 34(4), 57-62.

Goode-Cross, D. T., & Grim, K. A. (2016). "An unspoken level of comfort". Black therapists' experiences working with black clients. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 42(1), 29-53.

Haskins, N., Whiteld-Williams, M., Shillingford, M. A., Singh, A., Moxley, R. and Ofauni, C. (2013) The experiences of Black master's counseling students: a phenomenological inquiry. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 52, 162-178.

Haskins, N. H., Johnson, L., Finan, R., Edirmanasinghe, N. and Brant Rajahn, S. (2022) Latinx and Asian trainees counseling White clients: an interpretative phenomenology. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 61(2), 112-128.

Jennings, L., & Skovholt, T. M. (1999). The cognitive, emotional, and relational characteristics of master therapists. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 46(1), 3-11.

Kanazawa, Y., & Iwakabe, S. (2016). Learning and difficult experiences in graduate training in clinical psychology: A qualitative study of Japanese trainees' retrospective accounts. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 29(3), 274-295.

Karakurt, G., Dial, S., Korkow, H. et al. (2013) Experiences of marriage and family therapists working with intimate partner violence. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 24: 1-16.

Kaslow, N. J. (2020). My life as a female leader in the Academy: lessons learned. *Women & Therapy*, 43(1-2), 18-43.

Klinger, R. S., Ladany, N., & Kulp, L. E. (2012). It's too late to apologize: therapist embarrassment and shame. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 40(4), 554-574.

Levitt, H. M., & Piazza-Bonin, E. (2016). Wisdom and psychotherapy: Studying expert therapists' clinical wisdom to explicate common processes. *Psychotherapy Research*, 26(1), 31-47.

Levitt, H. M., Surace, F. I., Wu, M. B., Chapin, B., Hargrove, J. G., Herbitter, C., Lu, E. C., Maroney, M. R., & Hochman, A. L. (2021). The meaning of scientific objectivity and subjectivity: From the perspective of methodologists. *Psychological Methods*.

Mackie, G., Lambert, K. and Patlamazoglou, L. (2023) The experiences of psychologists working with transgender young people in school counselling: an Australian sample. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 36(1), 1–24.

Mackie, G., Patlamazoglou, L. and Lambert, K. (2023) School psychologists' perceptions of transgender training and education: an Australian qualitative investigation. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 10(4), 699–710.

Marzillier, J. (2010) *The Gossamer Thread: My Life as a Psychotherapist*. London: Karnac.

Matsuno, E., Hashtpari, H., Domínguez, S., Jr., Maroney, M. R., Gonzalez, K. A. and Knutson, D. (2023) 'There's no real roadmap that I know of': experiences of transgender and nonbinary graduate students in counseling psychology programs. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 70(1), 16–29.

McRobie, S., & Agee, M. (2017). Pacific counsellors' use of indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, symbols, and stories in their counselling practices. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 37(2), 103-127.

Meekums, B. (2008). Embodied narratives in becoming a counselling trainer: an autoethnographic study. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 36(3), 287-301.

Mjelve, L.H., Ulleberg, I., & Vonheim, K. (2020). "What do I share?" Personal and private experiences in educational psychological counselling. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64(2), 181-194.

Perren, S., & Richardson, T. (2018). Everybody needs a group: A qualitative study looking at therapists' views of the role of psychotherapy groups in working with older people with dementia and complex needs. *Group Analysis*, 51(1), 3-17.

Pittig, A., Kotter, R., & Hoyer, J. (2019). The struggle of behavioral therapists with exposure: self-reported practicability, negative beliefs, and therapist distress about exposure-based interventions. *Behavior Therapy*, 50(2), 353-366.

Podlogar, T., Poštuvan, V., De Leo, D., & Žvelc, G. (2020). The model of dynamic balance in therapists' experiences and views on working with suicidal clients: A qualitative study. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 27(6), 977-987.

Prytz, M., Harkestad, K. N., Veseth, M., & Bjornestad, J. (2019). “It’s not a life of war and conflict”: experienced therapists’ views on negotiating a therapeutic alliance in involuntary treatment. *Annals of General Psychiatry*, 18(1), 9.

Puvimanasinghe, T., Denson, L. A., Augoustinos, M., & Somasundaram, D. (2015). Vicarious resilience and vicarious traumatization: Experiences of working with refugees and asylum seekers in South Australia. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 52(6), 743-765.

Quinn, M. C., Schofield, M. J., & Middleton, W. (2010). Permission to speak: therapists’ understandings of psychogenic nonepileptic seizures and their treatment. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 11(1), 108-123.

Răbu, M., & McLeod, J. (2018). Wisdom in professional knowledge: Why it can be valuable to listen to the voices of senior psychotherapists. *Psychotherapy Research*, 28(5), 776-792. *Research*, 21: 267–76.

Revell, S. & McLeod, J. (2017). Therapists’ experience of walk and talk therapy: a descriptive phenomenological study. *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling*, 19(3): 267-289.

Rossouw, G., Smythe, E. & Greener, P. (2011). Therapists experience of working with suicidal clients. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 11,1-12.

Shahar, G. (2013). An integrative psychotherapist’s account of his focus when treating self-critical patients. *Psychotherapy*, 50(3), 322-325.

Speciale, M, Gess, J. & Speedlin, S. (2015). You don't look like a lesbian: A coautoethnography of intersectional identities in counselor education. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 9(4), 256-272.

Stirling, F. J. (2020). Journeying to visibility: An autoethnography of self-harm scars in the therapy room. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, e1537.

Tummala-Narra, P., Claudius, M., Letendre, P. J., Sarbu, E., Teran, V., & Villalba, W. (2018). Psychoanalytic psychologists’ conceptualizations of cultural competence in psychotherapy. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 35(1), 46-59.

Veseth, M., Binder, P. E., Borg, M., & Davidson, L. (2016). Recovery in bipolar disorders: Experienced therapists’ view of their patients’ struggles and efforts when facing a severe mental illness. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 26(4), 437-451.

Vulcan, M. (2016). “I’m a translating body”: Therapists’ experiences working with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 26(3), 326-337

Werbart, A., Annevall, A., & Hillblom, J. (2019). Successful and less successful psychotherapies compared: Three therapists and their six contrasting cases. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 816.

Werbart, A., Gråke, E., & Klingborg, F. (2020). Deadlock in psychotherapy: A phenomenological study of eight psychodynamic therapists' experiences. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 1-19.

Werbart, A., Missios, P., Waldenström, F., & Lilliengren, P. (2019). "It was hard work every session": Therapists' view of successful psychoanalytic treatments. *Psychotherapy Research*, 29(3), 354-371.

Wheeler, A. J., & McElvaney, R. (2018). "Why would you want to do that work?" The positive impact on therapists of working with child victims of sexual abuse in Ireland: a thematic analysis. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 31(4), 513-527.

Wu, B., Huang, X., Jackson, T., Su, D., & Morrow, S. L. (2016). Counselors' current counseling practice: A qualitative investigation in China. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 44(3), 306-330. GT

© Open University Press