



## Conference report

# Research and Practice: Right and Wrong – A Joint Conference for Counselling, Psychotherapy and the Arts Therapies

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for Counselling, Psychotherapy and the Arts Therapies

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## INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the 8<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the University of South Wales (USW) Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, held at USW Caerleon Campus on Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> June 2015. Primarily aimed at counsellors, psychotherapists and arts therapists interested in exploring and developing their practice potential, delegates were presented with the latest in research papers as well as a choice of workshops. The conference was well-attended with 65 delegates comprising students, graduates, and a lively mix of academics and practitioners; with representatives from CAMHS, CMHT and Learning Disabilities NHS teams in England and Wales, in

addition to representatives from further education, the major Third Sector providers and large and small private practices. Delegates came from across South Wales, the borders and South West, and even from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

## CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

Dr Peter Mayer, Head of the School of Psychology, Early Years and Therapeutic Studies at the University of South Wales, declared the conference open; presenting the notion of how important the sharing and embedding of research and practice is between academics and students, as well as the bright future of counselling and psychotherapy at USW with the imminent move to a purpose-built

Therapeutic Studies department at USW Newport City Campus. The regional impact of the Newport Community Counselling Service was also referenced as an important context for this annual event.

There were two keynote presentations during the day, the first by Professor Colin Feltham PhD, FBACP, who is Emeritus Professor of Critical Counselling Studies at Sheffield Hallam University and External Associate Professor of Humanistic Psychology at the University of Southern Denmark. Professor Feltham's thought-provoking presentation, entitled *'Is Our Research on the Wrong Path? Some Critical Thoughts'* invited delegates to recognise the usefully constructive nature of criticality and to challenge certain assumptions and dominant research paradigms. A detailed and theoretically underpinned overview of psychotherapy research was provided, encouraging delegates to consider the common factors between modalities. Current challenges in researching practice in the fields of counselling, psychotherapy and the arts therapies were discussed, as well as some of the constraints of researching within a Higher Education context. The notions of uncomfortable or inconvenient findings and difficult research questions were considered; these were explored in more detail in a subsequent workshop later in the day.

Feltham concluded by summarising that the concept of critical thinking is under-developed and neglected both in training and in practice, questioning whether the divorce between practitioners and theorists can continue. Imaginative approaches to conducting research were encouraged, as well as recognising "what we can do well".



**Photo 1: Professor Colin Feltham's keynote presentation**

Following this inspiring keynote presentation,

delegates could transition to one of two academic paper presentations. The first, *'Are we Rationalists or Tragedians: Redefining Therapy as an Aesthetic Act'* presented by Nicola Blunden of USW and Markku Nivalainen of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland; considered the apparent contradictions presented by the rational discourse of the mind and the poetic cries of the heart and the impact of this dichotomy on evidencing practice. This entertaining and thought-provoking presentation used Greek tragedy to explore the pain that reason may have suppressed, proposing tentative suggestions for how we might return the poets to the therapeutic polis, and use an aesthetic model to evidence practice.

The second academic paper entitled *'Insider/Outsider: Considerations Regarding Data Reliability in the Evaluation of Project Beit Sahour, A West Bank Therapeutic Music Project'* was presented by music therapist and USW MA Music Therapy course leader, Liz Coombes, on her work with USW occupational psychologist Michal Tombs (Coombes & Tombs-Katz 2015). This collaborative paper provided an evaluation of the therapeutic music project that took place in the West Bank in two mainstream schools, with particular emphasis on trainee motivation, training programme quality and subsequent use and embedding of knowledge and skills; exploring theories such as Motivation to Learn (Noe & Schmitt 1986; Colquitt, LePine & Noe 2000), Instrumentality (Tharenou 2001) and Social Exchange Theory (McDonnell et al. 2006).



**Photo 2: Liz Coombes presents Project Beit Sahour**

The "insider/outsider" position of the trainer as researcher was also considered: its impact upon the validity of the results and also its contribution to the authenticity of responses. Linguistic differences were also noted to have a possible impact upon responses and results, and the potential of interviews to address some of these issues in future research. This innovative approach to

sharing therapeutic music practice with communities in areas of conflict was also an opportunity to reflect upon researching practice and ensuring the rigour and validity of the design of such research.

Following these academic paper presentations were two workshops for delegates to choose to attend. The first, *'Drifting in Each Other's Thoughts: A Cross-Modality Workshop Exploring How Different Approaches Synthesize in Practice with a Particular Focus on Therapist Drift, the Use of Story, Counsellor Agency, and Patient Diagnosis'* by Jack Rochon, Elaine Davies, Julie Dorey and Catherine Jones was a collaborative, multi-disciplinary exploration of diverse practice approaches in search of synthesis.

The workshop represented the collective biographies of the Cardiff Psychotherapeutic Research and Practice Study Group synthesised into four emblematic but simple therapeutic elements, considering potentially transferable and effective ways of working between what are often considered to be incompatible ways of working. Embedded within a framework of social constructionist, constructivist, post-structuralist and structuralist cultures, the activities were designed to encourage a critical stance toward taken-for-granted ways of understanding one another's practice. Delegates were invited to consider their therapeutic sessions as art installations, cultural artefacts: multisensory and multidimensional. This highly innovative and collaborative session provided much challenging food for thought for delegates of all disciplines and modalities.



**Photo 3: Cath Jones, Elaine Davies and Jack Rochon present their cross-modality workshop**

The second workshop, presented by Penny Hallas and Lydia Cleaves, was entitled *'Virtual Meeting Place: New Technologies and Approaches in Art Therapy and Dramatherapy'*. This workshop

explored the way gesture-based technology provides a framework to hold and contain emotion as well as facilitating expression and insight into self and relationships.

Following a networking lunch break where delegates were able to browse and purchase texts from local publishers PCCS Books, the second keynote presentation opened the afternoon's proceedings. USW welcomed eminent art psychotherapist and group analyst, Professor Diane Waller, who is Emeritus Professor of Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths, University of London; Honorary Professor in the Centre for Mental Health, Imperial College; chair of the International Centre for Research in the Arts Therapies; and Principal Research Fellow, School of Applied Social Science, Brighton. Waller's presentation focused on the theme: *'Practitioners Becoming Researchers: Some Dilemmas'*, describing research as a "creative process". External influences on research were considered as well as the place of the arts therapies within such structures, and the inherent values of research.



**Photo 4: Prof Diane Waller's keynote presentation**

Waller insightfully shared the learning from her own research projects, reflecting on often unexpected outcomes which posed further questions or challenges; concluding by noting that as long as research is ethically sound, "there is no 'wrong' research". She noted that we should not be afraid of embarking upon research as practitioners, valuing our own skills and collaborating with specialists to ensure the rigour of research methods.

The next session provided an opportunity for delegates to attend one of three sessions where academic papers were presented. The first was led by Cate Harding-Jones, presenting and discussing

the research question: *‘Sex Trafficking and Counselling: Are the Needs of Trafficked People in Wales Being Met?’* Concurrently, Kirsty Bilski presented *‘Chasing and Befriending Transference in Sand Tray Supervision’*, considering how existing supervision models and theory integrate to underpin the use of Sand Tray in counselling supervision, and what the potential benefits of its use may be. The third academic paper presentation during this session was *‘When Love is Not Enough: Music Therapy with Adoptions in Crisis, An Evaluation of Findings Arising From Clinical Cases and Discussed in Light of Contemporary Attachment Thinking From the Fields of Neurobiology and Relational Psychotherapy’*, presented by music therapist, Joy Gravestock. A creative and thoughtful context was provided for the presentation framed by the story of The Velveteen Rabbit (Williams 1922):

“It doesn’t happen all at once”, said the skin horse, “You become. It takes a long time” (Williams 1922, cited in Gravestock 2015).

Gravestock considered research to be the practice of “sharing stories about our work”, first and foremost as a clinician focused on the clinical work; not an expert, but a practitioner on a continuing journey. A quotation from music therapist Jacqueline Robarts supported this practice-based approach to research: “Clinical work is the most trustworthy route to theoretical understanding” (Robarts 2014). Clinical work was presented and its theoretical orientation discussed, with reference to intersubjective theory (Stern 2010); developmental neuroscience and neuropsychology (Gallese & Ammaniti 2014), relational psychotherapy (Schorer 1994), modern attachment theory and trauma related theory (Wilkinson 2006, 2010).



**Photo 5: Joy Gravestock presenting about music therapy in adoption**

Extracts of clinical work with adoptive families illustrated the theoretical constructs presented and brought to life the presentation with examples of communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen 2010) and affect attunement (Stern 2010) shared and reflected upon. Ethical considerations were presented in specific relation to completing clinical work and research with this individualised client group.

The final session was a mixture of academic paper presentations and workshop options for delegates to attend. Rachel Waters presented *‘Carers’ Beliefs About Counselling: Expectations and Understanding’* which aimed to explore whether and how carers thought that counselling might help with difficulties associated with the caring role through a community-based participatory approach to research. Hayley Bartlett presented *‘The Relationship Between Predictor Variables and Counselling Outcomes in a University-Based Community Counselling Service’*, again focusing and exploring the provision of the Newport Community Counselling Service to determine ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ therapy works. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based counselling with trainee therapists and adds to the literature by elucidating issues surrounding the effects of four predictor variables on counselling outcomes.

As part of the *‘Art Psychotherapy and Counselling Masters Forum’*, four academic papers were presented and considered for the PCCS Books sponsored Masters Prizes:

Student	Title of academic presentation
Jodie Cooper	How do art psychotherapy therapeutic art processes therapeutically enable people with dementia to process the loss of their identity to promote identity?
Rhiannon Gray	Several shades of grey: A creative exploration of life as a trainee art psychotherapist in response to everyday life and conflicting roles
Imogen Harries	How the working environment of a secondary school impacts on what counsellors require from their supervision
Amy Wilson	Art therapy and the picture previously unseen: An exploration of interpersonal relationships through artwork

**Table 1: Art psychotherapy and counselling Masters student presentations**

The final workshop session was facilitated by Professor Colin Feltham, entitled *'Radical Honesty and Critico-Creative Thinking as Research Stimuli'*, based on the challenge that "much research in our field is pedestrian, convenience-driven and open to improvement". Using Brad Blanton's practice of 'radical honesty' (Blanton 2005) combined with free associative brainstorming, delegates were encouraged to identify topics and methods for research that have been accidentally neglected or passed over out of difficulty or sensitivity. Suspension of conventional thinking and "openness to radical new ideas in research" was encouraged.

## SUMMARY

The plenary session was an opportunity to celebrate the diversity and creativity of the sessions presented and facilitated throughout the day, with comments and questions from delegates to presenters and organisers. Dr Sheila Spong, Head of Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of South Wales, expressed her gratitude to Jack Rochon, Blanka Hubena and Helen Jury from USW for arranging and hosting the event so efficiently; and also thanked the USW School of Psychology, Early Years and Therapeutic Studies for funding three student places at the conference. The PCCS Books Award for Masters Level Research was presented to Imogen Harris, and the PCCS Books Art Psychotherapy Prize was awarded to Jodie Lee Cooper.



**Photo 6: Imogen Williams is awarded the PCCS Books prize for MA dissertation in counselling and psychotherapy subject area**



**Photo 7: Jodie Lee Cooper is awarded the MA Art Psychotherapy prize from PCCS Books**

It was summarised that the sharing of practice and approaches between modalities had been informative and inspiring, and that the notion of collaborative research was positive, possible and exciting.

The USW Therapeutic Studies team are excited to welcome colleagues from Play Therapy and Systemic Family Therapy to join the research conference next year, which will be held on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2016 at the University of South Wales.



**Photo 8: Dr Sheila Spong thanks the USW team who coordinated the conference**

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