

# Looking for the “Burning” questions: using action methods in supporting psychotherapy students to undertake research

Kate Kirk

Accepted: 14 December 2021  
© Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, ein Teil von Springer Nature 2022

**Abstract** This article describes the ways in which students move from being almost fearful of research to becoming practitioners who undertake research with confidence. The students are part of a top up BSc (Hons) Humanistic Integrative Psychotherapy programme; they are skilled, experienced and accredited practitioners who have to undertake a psychotherapy degree due to changes in Irish law. This article focuses on the ways in which action methods are used to guide the students through the research process from question-finding through to writing their proposals and onwards to completing their research projects. Psychodrama principles of warm up, action and sharing are integral to the process. Sharing is an expected and fundamental part of the process and takes the form of disseminating key results to their psychotherapy colleagues locally, nationally and internationally in print and at conference presentations

**Keywords** Research training · Psychodrama methods · Question finding

## 1 Introduction and background

This article describes the ways in which humanistic integrative psychotherapy (HIP) students are introduced to qualitative research methods and are supported to undertake a research project relevant to their practice. The top up BSc (Hons) course in HIP runs in the south-west of Ireland; it is administered by an independent training institute and is validated by Coventry University (UK). Due to proposed changes by the IACP (Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy), whereby all psychotherapy training was to be at BA/BSc level, accredited and experienced psy-

---

Kate Kirk (✉)  
Douglas, Isle of Man  
E-Mail: [kate.kirk@manx.net](mailto:kate.kirk@manx.net)

chotherapists were compelled to undertake a degree to ensure their continued access to good employment opportunities. This was to be supported by changes in Irish legislation ensuring that psychotherapist was a protected title in law. The top up, literally topping up their training, was designed to meet their academic needs, without having to retrain and ensure that their prior learning and experience was recognized. They could choose to complete the top up training in 2 years part-time or 1 year full-time. In summary, these experienced psychotherapy practitioners were converting their diplomas into degrees. An important and new addition to their learning was research.

This article follows the process of a weekend, a single day, and three supervision sessions. The time allocated to each session is approximate and given for guidance only. The period that is covered runs from October to July, within the final year of the top up; other modules run parallel to the Research Module.

## 2 About the research module (warm up)

As can be seen, the students coming into the top up degree were psychotherapists with a range of experience in different settings and some with many years of post-qualifying practice. There was some anxiety about returning to formal study after, what could have been, a long break from academic learning. The research module was viewed with a mixture of suspicion, fear and reluctance.

### 2.1 Research seminar (3h)

Prior to the Research Methods weekend workshop, the students attend a seminar entitled ‘*Research is Formalised Curiosity*’ from Zora Neale Hurston (1942) as stated on the opening PowerPoint slide. This statement is quickly followed by another quotation: “*Curiosity was Framed—it was ignorance that killed the cat*” (Arnold Edinborough<sup>1</sup>). These statements set the scene and aim to reframe the dynamic process of research into something more familiar to psychotherapists, that is the role of the curious and naïve inquirer. The seminar has the following aims:

- To begin the process of demystifying research
- To challenge the myth that relational therapies don’t agree with research
- To develop the skills and ability to critically read research articles and literature
- To introduce students to research terms
- To give information that will ultimately underpin the research proposal and project.

This warm up seminar explores the differing research paradigms with their distinct views of reality and philosophical bases. The students are introduced to the two main methodologies of quantitative and qualitative research, these appear mutually

<sup>1</sup> attributed to Arnold Edinborough, though rephrased in different ways by many others.

“Curiosity is the very basis of education, and if you tell me that curiosity killed the cat, I say only the cat died nobly.” Arnold Edinborough.

contradictory in their differences. They learn about the advantages and disadvantages of both methodologies.

The downside, of different psychotherapy forms ignoring research, is highlighted by McLeod (2017)

“Technological” forms of therapy which rely on scientific evidence, at the expense of personal self-awareness and cultural sensitivity, may fail clients, because they are impersonal and inflexible. “Relational” forms of therapy that disregard research evidence may similarly fail clients by disregarding the potential usefulness of relevant change processes and interventions about which the therapist has never heard.

McLeod (2017, p. 33)

Students are introduced to literature searching, critical appraising articles and a brief initiation to data and text analysis. This is after all the warm up.

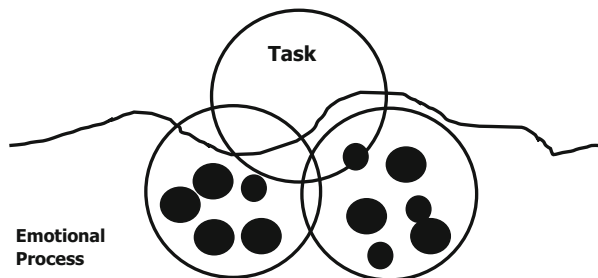
### 3 What are “burning” questions and how do we find them? (Action) day 1

The next step is a long weekend workshop. Prior to setting group ground rules, a short experiential exercise enables the group to describe the thoughts and feelings that may inhibit the task in hand. Based on Adair’s Circles<sup>2</sup>, see Fig. 1, the group is asked for three volunteers, once enrolled they have to remove their right shoe. That is the simple task for this exercise, however, the group then talk about their thoughts and feelings related to:

1. the request for volunteers
2. three people coming forward
3. discovering the simplicity of the task

The volunteers are questioned about their emotional process and thoughts in relation to volunteering and on discovering and completing the task. This exercise generates at least three flipcharts full of thoughts and feelings, summarised in Adair’s

Fig. 1 Adair’s Circles



<sup>2</sup> ©John Adair action-centred leadership concept.

Circles as Emotional Process. The group are asked to imagine the circles as balloons full of stones, marbles and weights representing all this emotional process weighing down the balloon that is the task. Interestingly, outwardly the group showed none of the anguish, suspicion, etc. held in their hearts and minds until they put words to their emotional process. We look at the ways of releasing the weight from the balloons/circles to enable to task run free—namely to talk about it; the task in hand for this workshop is RESEARCH, in capitals because it is BIG in their minds.

### 3.1 Affirming their transferable skills from psychotherapy to research

The group is divided into pairs, one named A the other B. In the first role play A plays an inquisitive child, about 7 years, asking B, the adult, “what is research?”. This exercise runs for about 5 min. The second role play involves B playing a known detective, (for example Miss Marple, Poirot, Columbo etc.) A plays the respondent to the “interrogation” about the case of research, again for about five minutes. Each role play brings out different aspects, the first activates the role of the naïve inquirer, the second the cognitive searcher for the truth.

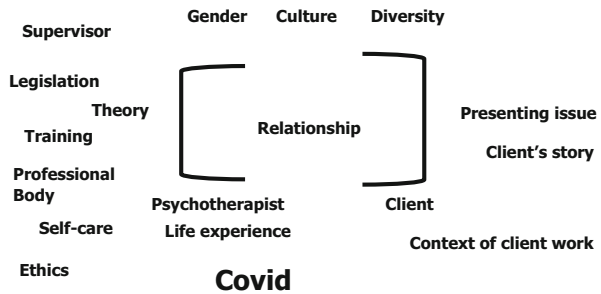
The group listed the skills they use as psychotherapists:

- Building relationships
- Setting boundaries and contract
- Confidentiality
- Listening
- Empathising
- Focusing
- Summarising
- Clarifying
- Setting goals
- Attunement
- Questioning
- Record/report writing

Each skill is represented as it applies to the role of researcher. So, nothing new regarding skills, just a different focus.

We end this session by laying out a continuum across the floor that runs from the role labelled *practitioner*, through a point labelled *practitioner-researcher* and another named *researcher-practitioner* to the end of the line, *academic researcher*. The students are encouraged to think about times in their professional lives when they have undertaken simple studies, for example as part of an assignment asking questions of colleagues, or maybe in work where they have looked at patient satisfaction questionnaires. This exploration encourages them to recognise their pre-existing investigation skills, that moves them towards the practitioner-researcher role.

**Fig. 2** Setting out the components that comprise and impact on the therapeutic relationship



### 3.2 Setting up the stage (2.5h)

To set the stage, two chairs are placed in the middle of the room and labelled psychotherapist and client. The group are encouraged to set out components that are present in this encounter (see Fig. 2 below for examples of what might be suggested in this exercise).

Once the aspects are “labelled” on pieces of card, which are dropped on the floor in relation to the two chairs, students walk around the stage and think about their practice. They are asked to reflect on aspects of their work that causes them to wonder “*why does this happen?*” “*If I did this with my client would it be different?*” “*What do I find challenging and do other people struggle with this?*”, “*What am I really curious about?*” “*What impact does my gender have on my clients of the same or different gender?*”. Once they find their specific question, they make a statement to the group about the proposed focus for their research. They are helped to rephrase this statement into a research question. Their own “burning” question is found.

Here are some of the questions, that arose came out of this process, from the 2020 cohort of students:

- What are the experiences of BAME<sup>3</sup> counsellors when they work with the “majority” clients?
- The Neurodiversity Movement: how has it impacted on Psychotherapy?
- What are the lived experiences of clients disclosing self-harming behaviours?
- What is the impact on pre-accredited counsellors of working for free in order to become accredited?
- What are Irish psychotherapy trainees’ experiences of self-care?
- What is the impact of a therapist’s pregnancy on the therapeutic relationship?

### 3.3 Research learning sets

The large group is divided to create small groups, which are themed around their “burning” questions. These research learning sets remain together for the six months’ duration of their research studies; they serve as peer support and for piloting purposes. Each group meet as required and maybe for some of the supervision sessions.

<sup>3</sup> BAME—Black and Minority Ethnic.

### 3.4 Decisions to make about research (1 h)

The next session within this weekend, is for the learning sets to work together and explore some of the decisions that need to be made related to their questions. Working together, they probe each other to come to some early decisions including:

- Deciding on a general research approach
- Deciding on the scale and structure of the study
- Deciding on the research sample
- Decisions related to data.
- Decisions relating to ethical issues
- Deciding whether or not a pilot study is required
- Deciding on a timetable: from planning to completion.
- Deciding with whom to communicate, prior to the research, during the process and the results on completion

All these decisions are written down because, though they are in an early stage of planning, it is good to note their thoughts at this time and the reasons why they make these decisions.

For psychotherapy students, the important decision that has to be made is the way in which their question is to be explored and measured. They discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different research methodologies. Certainly, the emphasis and bias in this course is towards qualitative methodology, as it reflects the philosophies and beliefs of humanistic integrative psychotherapy, whereby the fully participating human being is at the centre of the study and not viewed as an object under scrutiny. The researcher is similarly placed, collaborating with the participants to find the answers to their questions.

### 3.5 All about data collection (2 h)

In the Students' Research Handbook are different sets of data collection tools, including, a projective image, a phenomenological interview structure, examples of closed and open questionnaires, sentence stems, Likert Scales etc. All the tools have been used in different psychotherapy research studies. As can be seen in Fig. 3, which presents examples of sentence stems from a qualitative study and Fig. 4 which demonstrates a simple projective image that can be used to collect data / words.

*Please add words to form four sentences. These can be contradictory.*

Revenge is.....

Revenge is.....

Revenge is.....

Revenge is.....

Please provide your definition of revenge.....

**Fig. 3** An example of a qualitative questionnaire used for study into revenge

**Fig. 4** An example of a projective tool, used in a study to understand clients’ experiences of psychotherapy



What goes on behind this door?

In their learning sets, they work their way through the different types of data collection tools, taking it in turns to ask the questions or be the respondent. They explore how these tools might work for their proposed burning questions.

## 4 Day 2

### 4.1 Data analysis (2h)

Once the previous day’s learning is reviewed, there is a short introduction to data analysis, in this case—thematic analysis. They look at some of the material from their data collection questions, from the day before, then move into their learning sets. They are given sheets of collated and prepared text, from an actual study and presented as it would be prior to data analysis. The text is line numbered, double spaced and with a large left-hand margin for writing themes in (see example in Table 1). The students use highlighters and work through the text identifying their ideas as to the potential themes. This is a simple introduction to thematic analysis based in Braun and Clarke (2012) phases.

**Table 1** Example of data presented for textual analysis practice

What has surprised you about coming to R ... ..House?
1. <i>How easy it was to leave your child with them. I am so</i>
2. <i>protective over my son I didn't think I would be able to ever</i>
3. <i>leave him with anyone as his needs were so complex and no</i>
4. <i>one could ever look after him as well as I did. But I was made</i>
5. <i>to feel at ease with all the staff, and everything was done at</i>
6. <i>my pace &amp; it didn't matter how many questions I asked, or</i>
7. <i>how many times I phoned to check on him. I didn't feel I was</i>
8. <i>annoying the staff or made to feel like I didn't trust them. They absolutely couldn't do enough for us, and that is still the same</i>

- Phase 1: Get familiar with your data
- Phase 2: Generating initial Codes
- Phase 3: Searching for themes
- Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes
- Phase 5: Defining and naming themes
- Phase 6: Producing the report

Inevitably, and given time limitations as they only have 1.5h, this is a short taster of the process, up to phase 5. The learning sets come together and pool their ideas, they discover that the themes from each group are both similar and different. They discuss the themes that were outliers and they explore the dynamic of interrater reliability.

#### 4.2 Exploring ethical issues in counselling research (2.5 h)

McLeod (2013) describes a valuable strategy for a researcher to use in order to become aware of possible ethical or moral difficulties; he suggests the researcher

Experience the study imaginatively from the points of view of all potential participants e.g. clients, counsellors, people excluded from the study, interviewers, observers etc. McLeod (2013, p. 63)

As you can see McLeod's advice is a gift to exploring Ethics in Research socio-dramatically. In this case working as a whole group, students label on cards, and lay out, the essential factors of research ethics, i.e. informed consent, protection from harm, confidentiality and GDPR, and specific aspects related to their own burning questions. They embody the different ethical principles in roles and respond to questions from group members.

Finally, and importantly, dissemination of research findings is crucial to ensure results are broadcast to the widest of audiences. In the role of dissemination, students describe potential chances to present the findings from their studies in different settings to relevant audiences: participants, peers, colleagues, practitioners, funding bodies etc. The students are reminded of Bond's (2015) proposal that dissemination is an ethical requirement and an act of respect, particularly towards the research participants, who have donated their time and energy by being involved in the study.

#### 4.3 Putting together a research proposal (2h)

The students, by this stage, are well-equipped, in some ways, to put together a research proposal. As yet, they may not have the literature to underpin a formal proposal, but they have their burning questions and ideas as to who will be their population, maybe plans for data collection etc. In the Students Research Handbook, is a form, which has all the sections related to a research proposal. In their learning sets and based in all their ideas from the preceding sessions, they complete the form.

- Introduction/Background to Study
- Review of the Literature



- Aim and Objectives of the Study
- Research Question
- Methodology
- Population Sample (characteristics, inclusion and exclusion criteria, access)
- Procedures for Data Collection and Data Analysis
- Ethical Issues
- Intended outcomes/hoped for results
- Dissemination of Results

#### **4.4 Surplus reality—a journey to completion (1.5 h)**

This final session is exactly as described in the title. The students form a long line spread out on one side of the large room; this point represents the present. They are encouraged to move through time to the opposite side of the room, this represents the future; it is the moment when they encounter their completed study. In their journey through time, they imagine the helpful and hindering factors they find on the road. At the end point, they hold their completed research project in their hands; they make statements to their study about what it means to them and their plans looking forward to the future. In role reversal, their study responds to them and asks the student for a statement of intent about their next step. The whole group are witnesses to each statement.

### **5 Embodying the research proposal (more action) 2 weeks later**

The aim of this workshop is to encourage a deeper exploration of the research proposal and its contents. The students break into their learning sets with a handout that has detailed descriptions related to creating a research proposal. They consider their own work and, with the help of a completed research proposal found in the Students Research Handbook, they get immersed in what goes into a research proposal and how it is laid out.

Back in the large group, they come to a continuum laid out across on the floor, made up of large cards with the components of a research proposal; the headings are identical to the list on the previous page. Individuals are encouraged to stand by each card and in role reversal describe the role as “introduction”, or “aim and objectives”, or “research design” and so on. The audience ask the questions of the person in role to help their understanding; doubles help with the process and clarify inaccuracies.

Using the experiences from the morning session, the students return to their learning sets and spend the afternoon creating as much of their research proposal as they are able; this forms their first draft.

In the large group, each student takes it in turns to state their research question and aims and objectives. As everyone makes their statement, they are asked to think of a title for their study; they are persuaded to be creative and even a bit “whacky” in coming up with ideas. I give an example of a title I’d used for a presentation

---

“*Spoon and Spit: strategies for children who are selective eaters*”, to be as playful as possible.

## 6 Three supervision sessions (a little bit more action)

All the supervision slots are booked at the first workshop; in fact, the dedicated dates are to be found in the calendar for the whole year. The choices are related to preferred day and times.

### 1. Research proposal supervision (2 months after last workshop)

As the individual students book their supervision hour, it is recommended that they pair up, and come with another student for two hours. One week prior to supervision, students have to submit their draft proposal. This is the focus for supervision, working through the gaps in literature, challenging assumptions and ensuring a robust ethical framework. During this supervision, the data collection tools are scrutinised; in a way this first supervision starts the piloting process, the students take the questionnaire back to their research learning set to pilot the tool more formally. In the supervision setting, the piloting is less formal, the student role reverses with one of their participants and experiences the ease or difficulty of responding to what they, as researcher, are asking. Once the proposal is passed and students have presented it to any ethical boards as required, they can start their research study.

### 2. Data analysis supervision (8 weeks after 1st supervision)

The students attend this supervision in their learning sets, each group has 3.5h. They come armed with unanalysed texts, papers, and highlighters etc. this supervision is run as a goldfish bowl, with each student being in the middle of the group supported by another student and the trainer in the centre. Examples of text are analysed, themes teased out, discussed and noted. Then another student has their opportunity to be in the centre. This whole process prepares them for completing the data analysis on their own material whilst being supported by their research learning set.

### 3. Penultimate draft supervision (10 weeks later)

The students send their penultimate drafts two weeks prior to this supervision setting; they receive full written feedback on their work during the hour of supervision, this is done one to one. This is their final supervision; they have four weeks to complete and submit their assignment.

## 7 Sharing

This year’s students are sharing/disseminating their findings and, at the same time, meeting their responsibility to their participants by submitting to conferences and journals. Three have been accepted for an online international conference, two have had their research reports accepted in psychotherapy journals and one student is waiting to hear back from a journal. Another student has shared her findings at a multiagency safeguarding conference.

Please take note of the article that follows this one; it is the sharing from one of the Cork BSc students. Catherine Garrett found her burning research question in this research module and followed the process as described. She was awarded with a 1st for her study into psychotherapists’ relationship with neurodiversity.

This is my sharing with you. I have been running this workshop over the past six years. What never ceases to fascinate me is that without exception the “burning” questions, identified at the first research weekend, continue to be the questions the students research and write about for their final degree assignment. I believe bringing psychodrama and sociodrama methods into research training enlivens it and goes a long way in enabling students to befriend their research demons.

## References

- Bond, T. (2015). *Standards and ethics for counselling in action* (4th edn.). London: SAGE.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *Research designs*. APA handbook of research methods in psychology, (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269930410\\_Thematic\\_analysis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269930410_Thematic_analysis) (accessed 5th January 2021).
- Hurston, ZN. (1942). *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Chapter: 10 (Research) pp. 143. 2017 reprint Harper Perennial.
- McLeod, J. (2013). *Doing Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (3rd edn.). Vol. 28 (pp. 34–37). London: SAGE.
- McLeod, J. (2017). Why read research? *Therapy Today*, 28(5), 34–37.



**Kate Kirk** is a non-clinical member of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP); she focusses on research, training and supervision. From 1995–2000, she worked as a psychodrama psychotherapist in a palliative care service with young people and adults with life threatening and life limiting illness; she was also the research and development coordinator of the same trust (both roles were part time). She worked for Isle of Man Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS) from 2000 until her retirement in 2017. She was acting co-programme leader and research module co-leader for the BSc (Hons) in Humanistic Integrative Psychotherapy run by Cork Counselling Services Training Institute (Ireland), which is validated by Coventry University (UK) and retired in July 2021. Kate’s master’s study focussed on ways of working psychodramatically with clients who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and her PhD research looked at the impact of working with sexual trauma on therapists; both studies used qualitative methodology: Delphi and cooperative inquiry cycles. She was a member of the Research Committee of the Federation for European Psychodrama Training Organisations (FEPTO) from 2008–2019. She has written articles and chapters and co-edited two books on all the above.