

**THE GAP BETWEEN THE ACADEMIC AND THE PRACTITIONER  
IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING:  
PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD**

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**Abstract**

*I believe that there is a gap between academics and practitioners in the field of psychotherapy and counselling. The same gap exists in other fields and has been identified as potentially harmful. I believe the same might apply to our field. Practitioners do not readily apply knowledge produced by academics, and at the same time knowledge produced by practitioners does not participate in the overall discussion and development of our discipline. This paper focuses on the latter, arguing that practitioners do not have adequate avenues to participate in, and contribute to knowledge creation in psychotherapy and counselling and are in fact excluded from it. The existing one-directional relationship between the academic and practitioner groups could cause practitioners to feel alienated from the process of knowledge creation. I suggest that research needs to be carried out to explore this gap, what both groups think about it and the impact it has on our field. Hopefully this will lead to developing mechanisms that will allow practitioners to contribute regularly to knowledge creation as equals in our field.*

**Background**

My interest in this area began a few years ago when I was enrolled in the Masters in Counselling by Research with Honours at the University of New England (UNE) in NSW, Australia. I completed all the coursework requirements without much difficulty but my attempt to engage with my study as a researcher confronted me with unexpected problems. (I planned to do a qualitative study on the experience of recovering from childhood trauma.) It was then that I began to think about the differences between research academics and practitioners with a particular focus on practitioners working in private practice.

This Masters programme at UNE was designed especially for practitioners for the purpose of “upgrading” their existing qualifications (that permit them to practice psychotherapy or counselling) to research qualifications. Already the idea of “upgrading” from vocational to research qualifications implies that research qualifications are of higher quality or importance than vocational qualifications. I don’t believe that this view is unique to UNE. My impression is that this is a common enough perception in our field. It is not clear to me why vocational qualifications should be seen as inferior to research, but

it suggests perhaps that *thinking about* therapy might be seen as a higher level, more sophisticated or more important activity than *doing* therapy. Of course academics also *do*, and practitioners also *think*. However if a gap exists as I suspect it does, then it is the relationship between the *doing* and the *thinking* and the context in which they take place that might be at the heart of it.

My difficulties with the research part of my degree began when I started to interview my research participants. The relationships I form with my clients in my practice are for the clients' benefit. While I get paid for my time and effort, the relationship is there primarily to meet my clients' therapeutic goals. As a research student I suddenly found myself in a position where I was using similar interviewing skills to those I use in my practice, but for a different purpose entirely. My research participants told me painful personal stories but I was there just to record those stories for research purposes, not to engage or help them in any way. This felt uncomfortable and unnatural. In this instance I encountered what Brown (1994), writing in the field of Occupational Therapy (OT), sees as "the differences between the mission of a university [which] includes the acquisition of new knowledge through scientific inquiry ..." and the mission of the health care agency, which is "to provide a service to the health care consumer." (p. 23)

As I reflected on my discomfort, I realised two things. One was that as a Masters research student, what I was in fact doing was learning a new profession. I wasn't learning to become a better, more skilled psychotherapist. Rather I was being retrained to become a researcher. It was then that I also realised that there was an uncomfortable gap between these two domains of our profession. If I wanted to contribute to knowledge in our field I had to cross a clear line and learn a new profession. I couldn't do it from within my own profession as a clinical practitioner. Perhaps even more disturbing was the fact that my years of clinical practice with thousands of client hours seemed to offer little or no added value to the new role of researcher that I was learning.

### **The gap as a knowledge creation problem**

Annette Fisher, my clinical supervisor often says that as practitioners we are engaged in ongoing research whether we like it or not. Good practitioners are reflective and are always learning, forming new ideas, hypotheses and theories and applying them in their work. They also collect enormous amounts of data in the course of their work that could

shed light on psychological and therapeutic processes, on engagement with clients and many more aspects of psychology and therapy.

However, if as a practitioner I wish to share the knowledge I generate with my colleagues, my options are extremely limited. In thirteen years of practice I was able to publish only twice in refereed journals and neither were particularly mainstream or widely read by the academic community. The knowledge practitioners can generate would normally be considered anecdotal and not scientifically rigorous. Even if we do write and try to publish, practitioners do not necessarily possess knowledge in accepted research methods. We do not necessarily follow accepted research protocols nor are we necessarily familiar with the right vocabulary. We also do not have the time to engage in research as a priority, as our main occupation is practice. Practice is where our particular talents and interests are best expressed and where our livelihood comes from.

The very process of writing this paper confronted me with precisely the kind of difficulties that are at the heart of the gap between academia and practice. My experience highlighted what I have come to think of as the second-class status of practitioners in the knowledge creation domain of our field.

A key aspect of what I see as this second-class status concerns access to information. Unless a practitioner is enrolled as a student or happens to also be a staff member at an academic institution, he or she has no access to university libraries and to scholarly databases. Private access to these resources is prohibitively expensive and we are effectively cut off from the literature.

Akuni (2012) comments that “it is very difficult for the wider public to access contemporary research outputs as academic peer reviewed journal publications are not free ...” In access to knowledge, practitioners in our profession have a status that is neither better nor different than members of the “wider public”.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly articles are expensive and a private practitioner like myself cannot afford them. One publisher asked US\$82 for one article that I thought I might need for this paper. The

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<sup>1</sup> Having said that, I believe that the public should have access to all research data that are produced in publicly funded research programs. Although rebellion is brewing in some disciplines, the current situation is that data produced in publicly funded research programs are owned by private commercial publishing companies who then profit from selling them. But this of course is for a different discussion.

problem of course is that until I pay the fee and purchase access to the article, I cannot even be sure that it would indeed be useful. Abstracts do not provide enough information to tell me whether the article will contain what I need. It took a great deal of effort to find even the small number of resources I used in this paper. To save on costs I contacted a few authors directly and asked for copies of their articles, bypassing the publishers.

I have no doubt that a lack of adequate access to academic databases compromised the quality of my literature research. For example, with the exception of one book, I was unable to find any papers about this topic in our own field. But I don't know if this is because not much has been written or because of my limited access. As a result, I cannot position my paper properly within a relevant context in our field because I do not know what the context is or if it even exists.

However, even if I did have access to scholarly resources and even if my research methods were accepted as rigorous, chances are that I would not be able to get my work published in prestigious, well-respected academic journals. This is because I am not affiliated with a university or mainstream research institute. A sole practitioner is effectively a non-entity in the scholarly domain of our field. Those of us in private practices are basically left out of the mainstream knowledge creation and dissemination sides of our discipline. While we generate enormous amount of data and knowledge about a vast array of therapeutic issues, we have little or no scope for sharing them. We cannot feed our knowledge into existing academic research and our type of knowledge has little chance of being taken into account in determining policies that have an important impact on the public and on therapy services.

I have been unable to find anything written about this in our field. But there are examples from other fields where the exclusion of practitioners from knowledge creation has been noticed and discussed. Hughes et. al (2011) cite others who see the gap between academics and practitioners as simply a problem of information transfer between the academic side of a discipline and the practitioners. However, they cite Van de Ven & Johnson (2006) who argue that the gap is in fact a “knowledge-production problem, requiring a two-way coproduction of knowledge between academic and practitioner communities.” They go on to say that “while poor communication to practitioners is an issue, the involvement of practitioners in creating knowledge is equally important.”

(p. 42).

How we understand the nature of this gap will determine the ways in which we try to bridge it and I will discuss this towards the end of this article. It is important however to consider that if we approach this gap only as a matter of information transfer (from academics to practitioners) we effectively keep the status quo. It means that we continue to believe that knowledge creation is only the domain of academics, and that practitioners' role is predominantly to absorb this knowledge and try to apply it to their practices. I believe this paradigm is problematic because it implies that practitioners have no useful knowledge to contribute to the field and that the only valid knowledge comes from academia.

### **Is this gap bad for our field?**

Writers in a number of fields (e.g., Occupational Therapy, Management, Business, Development, Industrial & Organisational Psychology (I/O) and Library and Information Science (LIS)) believe that this gap represents a waste of knowledge that can compromise the development of a discipline and potentially even be harmful to it.

Bartunek (2007) who writes in the field of Management describes the academic and practitioner communities as “not-so-parallel poles ... solid, separate and challenging for each other to penetrate.” (p. 1323) She goes on to describe the anxiety that practitioners can experience when trying to engage with the language of research, which limits the ability of practitioners to engage with research data and apply them in their practice.

Hyatt *et al.* (1997) argue that there is a growing gap between the practitioner and the academic in the field of Industrial and Organisational Psychology. They say that “practitioners still complain that academics don't do relevant research that can inform the needs of organisations, while academics still complain that the research conducted by practitioners is too messy — or ‘not scientifically interesting’.” According to them, “... academicians and practitioners rarely work together to develop a mutually beneficial outcome”.

Writing in the field of Professional Communication, Cheng *et al.* (2009) argue that understanding in their discipline can be enhanced by studies “... conducted by the

professionals themselves, because they are the insiders in their professions ...” But they argue that the “... difficulty lies in the fact that many professional practitioners do not have appropriate background in analysing discourse, or more precisely, in talking about their research in a way which is recognised [in their field]” (pp. vii-viii). According to this view the discipline is simply missing out on the valuable, real-life knowledge that practitioners have to offer.

In a study by Hughes *et al.* (2011) about the collaboration between academics and practitioners in management “one of the most consistent findings was that practitioners seldom read academic journals and when they do, they are put off by the language, content and style” (p. 47). They express concern that management “schools may lose their legitimacy if their research is seen as irrelevant” (p. 41). I wonder if the same could happen to counselling and psychotherapy schools. Hughes *et al.* cite Van Aken who argued that “successful scholarship requires a partnership between the explanatory sciences (where the output is a causal model developed in controlled conditions)” and the practical side of the field.

### **Existing ideas and attempts at bridging the gap**

As I mentioned above, how we understand the gap determines the ideas we develop to bridge it. Bartunek refers to Boyer’s (1990) idea of “scholarship of integration” but argues that it has been “one-sided in that it focuses almost exclusively on individual academics presenting to practitioners.” She argues that “it does not address academics learning from practitioners or engaging mutually with them on any deep level” (2007, p. 1327).

She mentions a 2001 research forum that she co-edited on academic-practitioner “knowledge translation” (p. 1324). I have not seen this publication but the the idea of a two-way knowledge translation is appealing and interesting. It suggests moving away from the one-sided approach where practitioners learn to use academic writing style, language and terminology to a two-sided approach where both sides develop a common language together. Another way to look at it is that we need to move from a *paternalistic* system where academic knowledge filters down to the practitioner, to a more *democratic* system where knowledge is generated and is developed everywhere in the field.

An example of the one-sided approach from our field is the 1996 book by Windy Dryden *Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Practical Applications*. The book is designed specifically to address the gap by putting together a collection of research reports written in a way that practitioners can understand. The book does not have an introduction chapter but in the Preface Professor Dryden says:

Many counselling and psychotherapy researchers are suspicious of the pronouncements of practitioners because they are not backed up by research. Similarly, practitioners tend to ignore research findings because they consider that they have little relevance to their clinical practice. While research articles often contain a section on 'implications for practice', these are frequently very brief and are too general to be practically applied.

Consequently I invited a number of researchers to describe their research programmes and to spell out the practical applications of their findings.

The book tries to "sell" to practitioners the idea that research findings are relevant to their work and that they should make a bigger effort to apply them to their practice. In her brief to the contributors, the editor asked that they write about their research in a more concise and clearer way than they usually do, so that practitioners are more likely to understand and engage with the material.

Dryden adds that, "If the research-practice divide is to be traversed, then research, skills training and supervised clinical practice need to be far more integrated in training courses than they are at present." Although undoubtedly well intentioned, this approach does not challenge the existing paradigm. The assumption behind it remains that knowledge is the exclusive domain of researchers and that the only way that practitioners can engage with it is as recipients.

There have been a number of studies in other disciplines looking at existing collaboration between academics and practitioners. According to Hyatt *et al.*, (1997) "Bridging the gap requires tapping the reservoir of mutual respect and good will embodied in the scientist/practitioner model." The idea behind the "scientist/practitioner" model is that

... students should leave their graduate training with exposure to both as well as a strong foundation in professional issues so that they can function effectively in any endeavour they choose. Besides, if students are not trained in both areas, this may well serve to hinder communication and increase the academic-practice gap in the future.

However, before we can even talk about good-will we need to ask whether collaborative knowledge creation even exists in our field. Only after we have established models for

collaboration and attempt such projects, we can begin to discuss cultural and social aspects of collaboration between the groups as well as issues like good will.

### **Ways forward?**

#### *Enhancing the existing one-directional paradigm*

Although the communication between the academic and practitioner is at the moment one-directional—the practitioner is expected to come to the world of academic research but not the other way around—perhaps there are ways that in the short-term even this can be improved. When Bartunek (2007) asked scholar-practitioners “what would help management research have an impact on practice, they spontaneously replied that emotion was required” (p. 1326). I wonder if the same applies in our profession too. Is it possible that research would be more likely to be read and applied by practitioners if it was conveyed with more emotion? Perhaps as Bartunek comments, practitioners are “likely to respond more positively to language that wins both their hearts and minds” (p. 1327). Perhaps a similar question needs to be presented to scholar-practitioners in our field.

If what Bartunek argues is indeed true, then this means that the language and attitude currently used in academic writing need to be examined. This also brings back the question about the qualities and personalities that might be attracted to the two sides of our field. Perhaps those such as myself, who choose to go exclusively into practice are not so interested in research precisely because of the way it’s being done, and the particular cultural, linguistic and analytical characteristics of what is considered rigorous research.

#### *The geography and politics of knowledge creation*

Learning from my own experience I wonder if we need to find ways to allow practitioners to engage with knowledge creation in their natural environment, and without requiring that they change their profession or location, or that they reduce their practice time in favour of separate research activities.

We might need to think of ways to allow knowledge generated naturally in the course of practice to feed into, and form an integral part of mainstream research in our field. For this to be achieved, processes and procedures need to be put in place that allow for diversity of knowledge to be developed and used, at the same time as maintaining rigor, relevance and data protection. This suggests that we need to find ways to validate

knowledge obtained in a variety of ways, not only through controlled studies. This might require the development of new and innovative models of research beyond the standard paradigms currently in use. Processes and models for collaborative research will need to include structures and protocols that will enable academics and practitioners to interact regularly and effectively. There will also need to be a place for ideas for research to come from the practitioner community. (This paper is an example of the latter).

#### *Access to research information and resources*

It is clear to me that if we are to include practitioners in the knowledge creation side of our field, they will need to have access to the same information resources available to academic researchers. This could be achieved by creating a scheme that will allow interested practitioners to become unpaid affiliates in relevant university departments. This will create more equality in our field. It will not only cost little or nothing to universities, it will potentially contribute to them. Research produced jointly by practitioners and academics and using resources accessed through such affiliation scheme, can be published in professional journals and credited to the relevant university.

The suggestions above mean of course that respectability and recognition for practitioner-researchers will still be conferred by academic institutions and mainstream professional journals. In the longer-term we might want to think of completely new ways of approaching research in our field. Perhaps knowledge creation can be opened up and decentralised so that it does not reside only within existing traditional structures.

On a more general note, I believe that our field needs to be at the forefront of protest against the private ownership and commodification of research data and knowledge generated through public funding. We should also protest against the existing elitism in knowledge creation, ownership and dissemination. This is because our field directly contributes to the wellbeing of people and society, and because the knowledge we generate is within the grasp of the general public and should be readily available and applicable.

#### *Research is needed — learning from other fields*

My “research method” in this paper is loosely based on the case study model (my own case) and my conclusions or observations are anecdotal. Based on my own experience I argue (or hypothesise) that there is a gap in our field between academics and practitioners, that a most worrying aspect of the gap is the exclusion of practitioners from knowledge creation and that this gap is bad for our field.

I believe that research is needed in order to test these hypotheses. We need to find out whether a gap between academics and practitioners really does exist in our field, and if it does, explore its dynamics, its extent and the effect it has on both groups and on the field in general. If we find out that it does exist and that its effects on our field are negative, we need to start thinking about bridging it by enabling collaborative knowledge creation between academics and practitioners.

I have found several studies in this area such as Hughes *et al.* (2011) in the field of Business & Management, Ponti (2012) in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS), Roper (2002) and Fitzgerald & Roper (2000) in the field of development. These studies look at *existing* collaboration between academics and practitioners. They try to identify potential difficulties and learn as much as possible about what is happening when academics and practitioners collaborate in research. I don't know if such collaboration already exists in our field, but what these researchers have learned about the nature and dynamic of the gap and of collaboration could be useful to us when we begin to think about this in our field.

Shani *et al.* published the *Handbook of collaborative management research* (2008). Although it is in another field, such a book might have useful ideas and lessons for collaborative academic-practitioner research in psychotherapy and counselling. (To give an idea of the cost of accessing resources, at the time of writing this (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012) the hardcover edition of the book is sold on amazon UK for £104.50 and the electronic Kindle edition is sold for £73.15. These may not be large amounts for a university library but they certainly are for practitioners).

## Conclusion

When I began to think about this paper I was ambitious enough to think that I could come up with a model for collaboration between practitioners and academics. I thought that therapeutic effectiveness would be a good topic for collaborative research.

However the more I read about the gap between academics and practitioners (mostly in other fields), the more I realised that coming up with a topic for collaborative research was premature.

I am not sure at this point what we know about the gap in our field, and whether I missed any existing writings or research on the topic. I do know that I experienced this gap as a Masters student and even as I was working on this paper. As a practitioner, I experience it as an exclusion from the knowledge creation aspect of our field. I therefore believe that the problem is real. If practitioners are largely excluded from knowledge creation I wonder what effects this might have on our field, how much knowledge we are missing out on and what it does to practitioners to feel excluded. I know I feel frustrated and largely gagged by it. However I believe that research is needed in order to find out everything we can about this gap and what it might mean to our field. Perhaps a preliminary study about the gap itself could offer a good pretext for a collaborative study between academics and practitioners in our field.

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