

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.

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