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## Therapists and Academic Writing: “Once upon a time psychotherapy practitioners and researchers were the same people”

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**Abstract:** The views and feelings of psychotherapists around academic writing were explored using a mixed methods approach. An on-line survey completed by 222 psychotherapists produced both quantitative and qualitative data with the latter being subject to a Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Significant numbers of participants lacked confidence about participating in academic writing. Fear of rejection, not being good enough and not knowing what is required were prominent underlying factors. Current academic writing was viewed as overly intellectual, not focused on clinical practice and the preserve of academics and not practicing therapists. Difficulty in accessing academic material lying behind pay walls was another factor limiting participation in academic writing as well as a lack of formal support. Clinical relevance and clarity of expression were viewed as the key factors of good academic writing. There was overwhelming support for academic writing to be a core skill taught in formal psychotherapy trainings.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, Academic-practitioner divide, Confidence, Fear, Mixed methodology, Practitioner research

There is an increasing emphasis on research in psychotherapy. One significant aspect of this focus is a demand for the engagement with academic writing and publication of research. Therapists are both expected to read and keep updated about ongoing research in their field and to disseminate their own findings. What is this like? What might be the obstacles and/or benefits? How can therapists' knowledge be communicated?

An overarching aim of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how therapists experience the growing emphasis on research-supported practice. This project is an extension of two previous studies (Bager-Charleson, du Plock, & McBeath, 2018; Bager-Charleson, McBeath, & du Plock, 2019) into therapists' engagement with research. The aim with

this study was to gain a deeper understanding of links between practice and research through exploring therapists' experiences of research writing and academic publication.

### Literature Review

A previous study highlighted a strained relationship between psychotherapy research and psychotherapy practice (Bager-Charleson, McBeath, & du Plock, 2019). Therapists were often mentioned at the margins of the research community. Castonguay, Nelson, Boutselis, et al (2010, p.346) asserted, for instance, that, “It is well established that the practice of many full-time psychotherapists is rarely or non-substantially

influenced by research". Tasca, Grenon, Fortin-Langelier, and Chyurlia (2014, p.197) described what they termed a "significant practice–research divide" within psychotherapy and stated that, "clinicians often do not use existing research to guide their practices, and researchers typically do not rely on clinicians' input when designing psychotherapy research". The estranged relationship between psychotherapy research and psychotherapy practice has been underlined by reports that: therapists have, historically, rarely initiated research (Norcross & Prochaska, 1983); that therapists seldom read research (Beutler, Williams, Wakefield, & Entwistle, 1995; Boisvert, & Faust, 2006; Morrow-Bradley, & Elliott, 1986); and that therapists are more informed by clinical experience, supervision, personal therapy and literature than by research findings (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986; Safran, Abreu, Ogilvie, & DeMaria, 2011).

Previous qualitative research (Bager-Charleson, du Plock, & McBeath 2018; Bager-Charleson, McBeath, & du Plock 2019) highlighted a feeling that some therapists experience a lack of emotional and relational focus towards research. One therapist said: "I underestimated the analysis stage. To read verbal words on the written page ...so rife with emotional content and splitting, and you know, polarities and mess and shame, and, you know... What do you do with that? How do you find an expression?" Therapists also, alarmingly, referred to 'keeping quiet' about their research interest.

## Researcher-Practitioner Gap

In our search through the literature one paper stood out and it takes the form of a presentation at a psychotherapy conference by Abarbanel. This author highlighted "a gap between the academic and the practitioner in psychotherapy", suggesting that "practitioners do not have adequate avenues to participate in, and contribute to knowledge creation in psychotherapy and counselling" (2012, p.1). This seemed like a pretty fundamental, yet hitherto neglected, aspect of our enquiry. Addressing practical aspects such as online library access to engage in others as well as contributing with their own research, Abarbanel asserts that:

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. (Abarbanel, 2012, p.4)

She goes on to suggest that, "the existing one-directional relationship between the academic and practitioner groups

could cause practitioners to feel alienated from the process of knowledge creation" and 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". (2012, p.1)

Abarbanel's contribution opened a new line of enquiry in terms of a potential 'academia versus practitioner' dichotomy. After initial email contact Abarbanel became a collaborator and helped to complete the literature review in terms of a 'narrative' literature review organised around the experienced 'gap'. She coined the phrase "once upon a time psychotherapy practitioners and researchers were the same people", used in the title of this paper.

According to McLeod (2001), collaboration between researchers and practitioners was not only the norm historically, but research was led by practice and was "under the control of practitioners" (2001, p.4), implying that psychotherapy practitioners and researchers were the same people. He (2001) pointed out that since the 1970s, a number of factors have conspired to drift the domains of practice and research in psychotherapy apart, to the point where a clear gap has been repeatedly identified (Abarbanel, 2012; Henton, 2012; Widdowson, 2012; Darlington & Scott 2002; McLeod, 2001; Long & Hollin, 1997). One side of this fragmented relationship is that of the academic/researcher for whom carrying out studies in psychotherapy and publishing research is the main occupation. On the other side, are the practitioners, many in full-time independent practice, whose main activity is therapeutic work (LeJeune & Luoma, 2015).

According to Long and Hollin (1997), there is "probably some force to the argument that researchers do not always consider an applied perspective" (1997, p.81). They also say that a "number of clinicians hold negative attitudes towards research, which is portrayed as irrelevant to practice and ranking below more pressing service commitments" (p.77). Citing Darlington & Scott (2002), Henton refers to a word-association experiment in which practitioners described research as "objective, hard, cold, scientific, factual, time consuming, difficult, prestigious, tedious, expert" (Henton, 2012, p.11).

In 1949, the field of clinical psychology in the US committed itself to educating psychologists as both clinicians and researchers. What became known as the 'Boulder Model' (Raimy, 1950; Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2003; Boisvert & Faust, 2006) has been often hailed as successful (Strickland, 1983) but it has also been criticised. Frank (1984), for instance, argued that the role of researchers is "incompatible with [psychotherapy students'] interests and abilities" (1984, p.417). He suggested that there are differences in 'vocational interests', 'personality traits', 'cognitive abilities' and possibly even 'family background' between individuals drawn to become clinicians compared with those who are drawn to research.

Frank's speculations are echoed in findings from McBeath's (2019) survey of the motivations of psychotherapists.

Therapists unequivocally talked about themselves and their capacity to be with clients; they did not talk about theory, modalities or technique. They also readily acknowledged the significance of personal trauma and their experience of therapy as motivating factors in seeking to join the psychotherapy profession. More subtle threads of meaning also emerged; for example, in addition to empathy and respect for clients, the most experienced therapists seemed to have found other more personal qualities within themselves that were seen as necessary for effective therapy. (McBeath, 2019, p. 8)

These findings would suggest that those who choose psychotherapy as their main profession might be different people from those who choose research as their main career path.

### **Homeless Practitioners?: Feeling Estranged From Research**

Additional challenges come from difficulties in reflecting or representing the reality of the lived experience of the therapeutic encounter within existing research methods and protocols. Bager-Charleson, du Plock, & McBeath (2018) demonstrated that practitioners can feel alienated from essential aspects of research, such as data analysis for example. In the practice of psychotherapy, they note an "emphasis on attending to the emotional and embodied responses between actual people" (2018, p.17). However, doing data analysis "reflects a reductionism, which contrasts therapists' narrative knowing" (2018, p.17). Stricker (1992) argued that research needs to broaden the scope of research methodologies as one of the ways to encourage practitioners to function as researchers.

Bager-Charleson, McBeath, and du Plock (2019) have shown that practitioners can feel "homeless", unsupported undervalued and poorly trained as researchers. They conclude that "more systematic efforts are required to understand and foster psychotherapists' engagement in research activities' and that 'a stronger, more cohesive research community could provide a broad framework for practitioners to develop their research skills and sense of research activities'" (2019, p.204). Widdowson argued that the willingness is there among therapists both to use and participate in research but that they require both "adequate training and preparation' as well as 'on-going support and feedback'" (2012, p.185).

To further address the gap between practice and research some have suggested establishing practice-based research

(PBR) (LeJeune & Luoma, 2015; Henton, 2012; Widdowson, 2012). PBR models can include "non-experimental research, research by practitioners, research in naturalistic/routine clinical settings, and in particular therapy research paradigms such as case studies, process research and effectiveness studies" (Henton, 2012, p.14). Some however, view such models as unscientific and as methodologically problematic (Long & Hollin, 1997, p.76). McDonnell, Stratton, Butler, and Cape (2012) report on the creation by the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) of a Research Faculty to help bridge the gap between research and practice. Their aims are "to support the use of research in psychotherapy, encourage therapists to carry out research and disseminate the results of such research" (2012, p.167)

An essential tool that is indispensable for communicating knowledge in the field of psychotherapy is the ability to write for publication. Pittam, Elander, Lusher, et al (2009) demonstrated the need for better instruction of psychology students in all aspects of academic writing. Barkham and Mellor-Clark (2003) highlight the respective contributions of both research-based practice and practice-based research and argue that they are both necessary. They explain that the structure and shape of papers from both sides, "are suited to differing paradigms – hence, many of them do not fit the traditional framework so often associated with academic journals". They therefore suggest that the 'one size fits all' model should be abandoned if 'researchers and practitioners are to benefit from the dissemination arising from ... differing but complementary activities' (Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2003, p.323).

### **Academic Writing**

The suggestion that many psychotherapists could be estranged from research and that their clinical work is not substantially informed by research inevitably invites inspection of what their relationship might be with the primary vehicle that communicates research, namely, academic writing. So, is reading academic writing a mainstream activity of psychotherapists? To what extent does it influence clinical work? Is academic writing in the psychotherapy profession a common activity or a minority activity? How much academic writing is done by psychotherapists? The research reported in this paper attempted to address questions such as these and to obtain some robust sense of where academic writing might currently be positioned within the psychotherapy profession.

The significance of the research activity seemed clear and important. If the concept of the researcher-practitioner split is something that was manifest both in the writing and reading of academic writing then there is a real possibility within psychotherapy that the uncertain relationship between

researchers and practitioners is becoming more tenuous through the gradual emergence of divergent domains of professional knowledge. This potential for a real researcher-practitioner split would inevitably impact on our clients with opportunities being lost for clinical practice to be meaningfully informed by research. Conversely, a researcher-practitioner gap would mean that research could proceed without being informed by clinical practice and therefore could be seen as not relevant for mainstream psychotherapy practitioners.

## Methodology

With 'Critical Realism' (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006) as an epistemological umbrella, we explored therapists' accounts of their attitudes and experiences around academic writing. We adopted a mixed-methods framework (Landrum & Garza, 2015; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Bager-Charleson, McBeath, & du Plock, 2019; Priest, in press) drawing from therapists' participation in an on-line survey. The survey focused on obtaining a broad view of what psychotherapists considered to be significant issues around academic writing. Our original plan was to engage in interviews with survey respondents who had offered to provide additional post-survey information. However, the survey provided opportunities for survey respondents to offer free-text comments which was an option taken up so extensively that a decision was made to focus on this qualitative data source through the lens of *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Combining quantitative approaches to the data with qualitative approaches is often legitimised with a reference to how each perspective may answer different research questions (Landrum & Garza, 2015; Priest, in press). The qualitative section aims to add a deeper understanding into idiographic, unique cases, and we felt that the elaborate free text comments added considerable value here.

### Ontological and Epistemological Positions

The mixed methods approach adopted invites reflection on the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research. Traditionally, quantitative and qualitative methodologies have been seen as distinctly different research approaches and each has been associated with seemingly incompatible and non-overlapping philosophies (Lund, 2005). From an ontological perspective, quantitative methods have been associated with *realism* which holds that there is an objective reality independent of our cognitions and perceptions. In contrast, qualitative approaches have been associated with *relativism* where reality, as we know it, is seen as an intersubjective and socially based phenomenon. From an epistemological stance, quantitative approaches have been

associated with *positivism* which holds that reality is objective and can become known through empirical observation. In contrast, qualitative approaches have been associated with *interpretivism*. An interpretivist stance assumes that reality is fluid and subjective, and that reality can only be observed as approximations or estimates.

The mixed methods approach adopted in this research essentially rejects these dichotomous ontological and epistemological positions and, instead, favours an alignment with the fundamental assumptions underlying critical realism. Originally formulated by Bhaskar (1975, 1998) critical realism is an alternative philosophical position to the classic positivist and interpretivist paradigms and, to some extent, offers a unifying view of reality and the acquisition of knowledge. Critical realism can be viewed as being positioned somewhere between positivism and interpretivism. Critical realism accepts the principle of an objective reality independent of our knowledge. It also accepts that our knowledge of the world is relative to who we are and that, ultimately, our knowledge is embedded in a non-static social and cultural context.

Critical realism has several key - sometimes complex - concepts. One proposition is the notion that reality is layered into different domains i.e. the empirical, the actual, and the real. This 'stratified ontology' allows both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to co-exist and to have more relevance in certain domains than others. Critical realism also acknowledges the complexity of the world and recognises 'the fallibility of knowledge' which refers to the probability that our knowledge of the world may be misleading or incomplete. Overall, the key importance of critical realism, in the context of the research reported, is that it offers a non-competing and philosophically inclusive paradigm and one that is aligned with a mixed methods approach.

### Survey Questionnaire

The content of the survey was derived from the authors' review of relevant literature, discussions with colleagues and feedback from a pilot survey which involved twelve psychotherapists. The survey focused on a number of key issues which included,

- Psychotherapists' confidence around academic writing
- The key elements of good academic writing
- An audit of psychotherapists' academic output
- Whether academic writing should be a taught skill for therapists
- The key reasons for academic writing
- The extent to which clinical practice is informed by published work.

## Sampling Method

The survey was distributed widely with support from the European Association for Integrative Psychotherapy (EAIP) and the Metanoia Institute. A purposive sampling method was used to identify potential survey respondents with the social media platform *LinkedIn* being the primary source. *LinkedIn* contains the professional profiles of many hundreds of self-identified psychotherapists. A growing number of studies are using social media to identify participant samples in psychotherapy research (e.g. Lidden, Kingerlee, & Barry, 2017; McBeath 2019). The authors also used their existing academic networks to identify suitable survey participants.

The selection criteria for survey participants required them to be post-qualified and working clinically as a practitioner or academic. Most individuals on their *LinkedIn* profiles included membership of a professional body (e.g. UKCP, BACP). Individuals meeting the selection criteria received a personal message describing the aims of the survey and a link to the on-line survey. A total of 222 individuals completed the survey. Approximately 950 survey invitations were sent which gives a response rate of 23%. As an overall response rate for the survey, this response rate is an approximation as it is not known how many of the small number of individuals contacted through academic networks, as opposed to contacted via *LinkedIn*, actually took part in the survey.

## Ethical Considerations

The Metanoia Research Ethics Committee gave ethical approval for the research. A link to the data privacy policy of the company that hosted the on-line survey was provided. The survey introductory page stated that all responses would be treated in confidence.

## Results: Quantitative Data Analysis

A total of 222 psychotherapists completed the on-line survey. Some indication of how representative the sample might be of the wider profession comes from the gender breakdown of respondents which was female (71%) and male (29%). These figures correspond quite closely with the gender breakdown reported in the 2016 UKCP membership survey where the figures were female (74%) and male (24%). So, in terms of gender breakdown the sample in the academic writing survey appears well aligned with the wider practitioner body. Responses covered a diverse range of self-reported modalities. By far the largest grouping was for respondents who identified themselves as Integrative (53%). Next were those identifying as Psychodynamic (11%). Other modality groupings were

Person Centred (7%), Existential (4%), Transactional Analysis (4%), Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (2%), Gestalt (2%), Pluralist (2%) and Cross-cultural (0.5%). The 'other' category (14%) included Systemic, Psychoanalytic, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Arts therapy, Transpersonal and Humanistic.

Within the survey respondents were asked how confident they felt about writing an article for publication within the psychotherapy profession. The data obtained, shown in Figure 1, presents quite a stark set of findings. Less than 50% expressed confidence about writing an article with 8% being *very confident* and 40% being *confident*. Nearly a third of respondents (32%) expressed a lack of confidence about writing for publication with 22% being *not confident* and 10% being *not at all confident*.

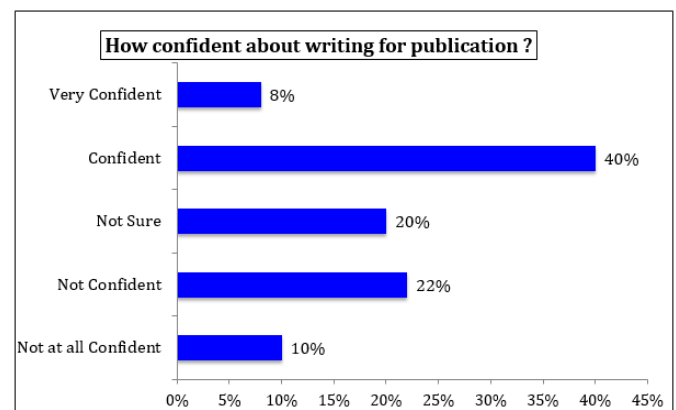


Figure 1: Survey respondents' confidence about academic writing

The respondents who stated that they were not confident about academic writing had the opportunity to express why this should be and the results (multiple responses) are shown in Figure 2.

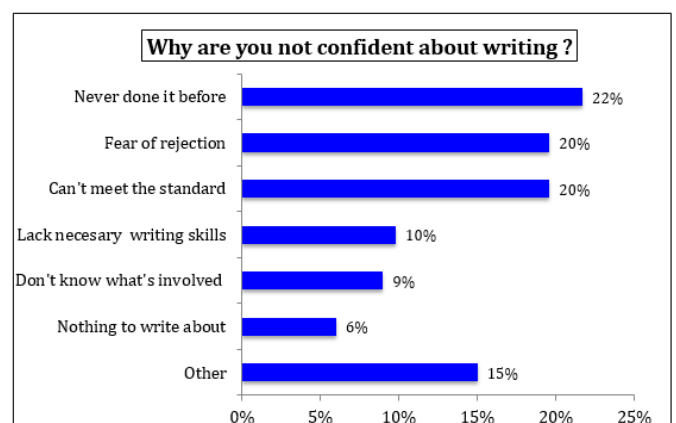


Figure 2: Reasons for lack of confidence about academic writing



From Figure 2 it seems that a major reason psychotherapists lack confidence about academic writing is simply because they've *never done it before*; this reason accounted for 22% of all responses. A further 20% accounted for *fear of rejection*.

It can be seen in Figure 2 that some therapists feel a lack of confidence because they feel they have *nothing to write about*; this reason accounted for 6% of all responses. There were 21 separate free text comments offered under the *other* response; this accounted for 15% of all responses. The overarching reason given in this response category was a lack of time especially when balanced against the demands of clinical work.

The survey offered the opportunity to get some sense of the amount and diversity of writing being done by psychotherapists. The data are summarised in Figure 3 and are from a multiple response question.

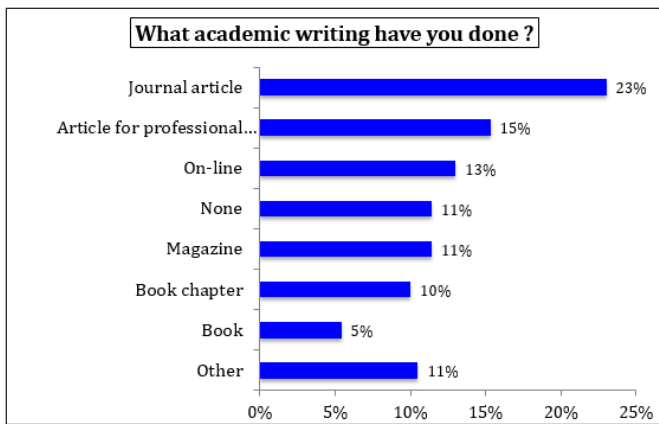


Figure 3: Academic writing done by survey respondents

Figure 3 shows that writing a journal article is the most common form of academic writing; this accounted for 23% of all responses. The next most popular form of writing was for a professional organisation (15%). Writing activity for on-line media accounted for 13% of all responses. The data shown in Figure 3 come from a multiple response question which allowed individual respondents to indicate that they may have done one or more types of academic writing. There were 45 free-text comments made in the *other* category for academic writing activity. The majority made reference to Masters' or PhD dissertations; but also mentioned were blogs, book reviews, academic poster presentations and client hand-out materials.

Survey respondents were asked what, in their view, were the key features of good academic writing. The question allowed multiple responses with the data presented in Figure 4 below.

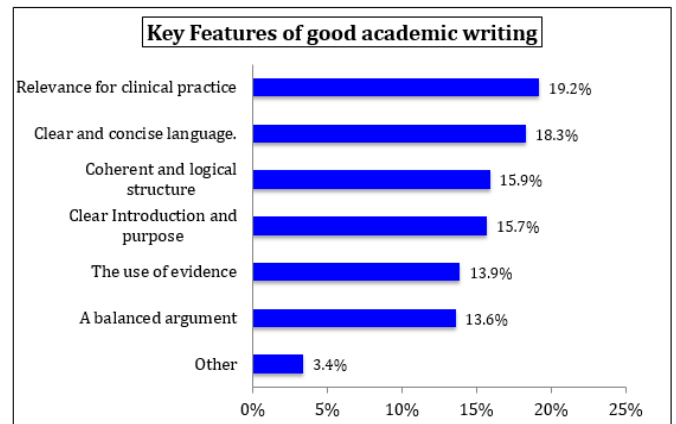


Figure 4: Key features of good academic writing

The data shown in Figure 4 present a clear picture of what the survey respondents considered to be key features of good academic writing, namely, *relevance for clinical practice* (19.2%), and *clear and concise language* (18.3%). Two following response categories, *clear introduction and purpose* (15.7%) and *coherent and logical structure* (15.9%) reinforce the point that what psychotherapists value in academic writing is clarity of expression. This emphasis is seen as more important than *a balanced argument* (13.6%).

A total of 26 free text comments were offered about the key features of good academic writing. These included being creative/original in presenting ideas, effectively disseminating knowledge, and evidence of reflexivity. There was a single mention of the need to offer a clear ontological and epistemological position within academic writing.

Within the context of exploring psychotherapists' views around academic writing, we considered that it was important to gauge the extent to which their clinical practice is informed by reading published output such as journals/articles. 31% of respondents indicated that their clinical practice was informed by reading journals/articles *to a large extent*. A further 57% chose the response *to some extent*. So, over 80% of participants indicated that their clinical practice is informed by reading published material.

In seeking to explore psychotherapists' views on academic writing it became clear that significant numbers of practitioners do not feel confident or able to effectively engage in academic writing. So, the obvious question that follows from this situation is quite straightforward - *Should academic writing be a core skill in psychotherapy trainings?*

Figure 5 shows that a truly large number of survey respondents (78%) think that academic writing should be a core skill in taught psychotherapy trainings.

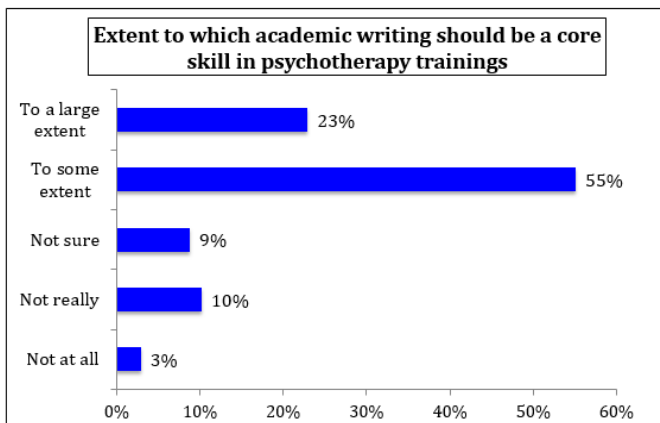


Figure 5: Should academic writing be a core skill in psychotherapy training ?

## Findings: Qualitative Data Analysis

The survey respondents gave a total of 200 free text comments which included statements of clarification, short comments about a range of issues and, in some instances, a paragraph or more containing quite detailed accounts of personal experiences and reflection, amplifying some of the issues highlighted in the survey. This body of information and knowledge was recognised and treated as a relevant and valuable source of qualitative data and was subject to a thematic analysis.

### Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis is currently a broad term that covers a range of approaches which ultimately seek to find meaning across data sets. In exploring the qualitative data from the survey, the approach taken was informed by the particular approach articulated by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019) called *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* (RTA).

Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a method rather than a methodology and, as such, it is not aligned with any specific theoretical framework. It can thus be applied using a range of different theoretical frameworks. To amplify this point, Braun and Clarke (2006) state that RTA can be a realist method, a constructivist method, or a method aligned with critical realism. They place a strong emphasis on the researcher being an active creator of knowledge and reject any quasi-positivist notion that themes and meanings simply emerge from the data as if they somehow pre-existed.

The key underpinnings of Reflexive Thematic Analysis are summarised by Clarke and Braun (2018) as follows,

We intended our approach to TA [thematic analysis] to be a *fully* qualitative one. That is, one in which qualitative techniques are underpinned by a distinctly *qualitative* research philosophy that emphasises, for example, researcher subjectivity as a resource (rather than a problem to be managed), the importance of reflexivity and the situated and contextual nature of meaning. (2018, p. 107)

Clarke and Braun (2018) provide a clear emphasis that in their version of Thematic Analysis themes are more than a holding device for pieces of information but serve, “as key characters in the story we are telling about the data” (2018, p.108). A similarly important emphasis is also placed on the potential for Reflexive Thematic Analysis to move beyond description and summary. Clarke and Braun state that, “rich analysis typically moves from simple summation-based description into interpretation; telling a story about the ‘so what’ of the data.” (p.109).

The theoretical flexibility of RTA means that it can be utilised to ask different sorts of research questions. For example, it can operate in a deductive way where themes are constructed from the data or in an inductive way where theme development is guided by existing ideas and concepts. The method can also function in a constructivist manner where the focus is on how meaning is created. There is also a potential alignment with a critical realist position where the focus is on an assumed reality evident in the data.

The practical steps of our thematic analysis were step-wise and relatively straightforward:

- *Data immersion* - a process of intimate familiarisation with the data.
- *Preliminary coding* - a search for unification of ideas and issues which are then assigned a unique identity (e.g. colour coding).
- *Reading and re-reading* - firming up on preliminary coding and also seeing if meanings change over readings.
- *Creation of themes from codes* - a higher order of meaning.
- *Data saturation* - Is there a point when no new codes or themes are apparent?
- *Review themes* - Are they still meaningful and stable?
- *Write up the themes* - a crucial element in meaning making.

## Thematic Analysis Outcomes

Within the qualitative material offered by survey respondents there were a number of themes that became prominent during the analysis process. They added a depth and direction of meaning which was quite different in nature from the data reported in the on-line survey. The survey produced valuable aggregated attitudinal data whereas the thematic analysis revealed individuals' feelings and their felt vulnerabilities in relation to academic writing. Five main themes were created from the data:

- *writing style*
- *difficulty in accessing academic writing*
- *the academic-practitioner gap*
- *fear and lack of confidence*
- *lack of knowledge and support*

## Writing Style

Several comments focused on what is seen as the style of writing in published work that is unappealing and, specifically, difficult to understand.

- "Far too often, academic writing is marred by being poorly written and difficult to understand."
- "Many therapists are deterred by the use of language in journals. [...] Part of your training was deciphering journals which is ridiculous as surely the purpose of these journals and articles is to communicate with as wide an audience as possible."
- "I have found academic writing to be increasingly dry [...] not allowing much room for matters of the soul or heart."

McLeod (2015, p.9) made an important point in commenting that "academics primarily write for other academics and publish in journals that are not read by practitioners". This idea that academic writing in psychotherapy is an activity done by members of an exclusive club other than the practitioners was expressed by a number of the survey respondents.

## Difficulty in Accessing Academic Writing

For some practitioners academic writing is unappealing because access to resources that would enable them to do so is currently highly restricted. Here are a few comments on this issue,

- "With no access to databases (private access to publications is prohibitively expensive) and no name

of organisation or academic institution to back you up, the odds of private practitioners publishing, if they wanted to, are extremely poor."

- "Journals are not open access and the language often obscured meaning."
- "It is difficult to access academic reading materials once you stop being a student."

Accessing academic writing - particularly psychotherapy-based research - is made extremely difficult for practitioners not affiliated to academic institutions. The vast majority of journal articles and other resources are held behind publishers' pay walls and the price of accessing just a single journal article is prohibitive on an individual basis. There is a tendency towards an increased open access policy among publishers, but this arrangement involves a high fee which again requires the support of institutions. As McLeod (2018) has noted, this situation is a real barrier to many who would wish to promote research-informed practice.

## The Academic-Practitioner Gap

There was a clear sense of an academic-practitioner gap within psychotherapy which was, in part, exacerbated by a view that psychotherapy writing is over-intellectualising the profession and comes at the expense of clinical skills development.

- "The emphasis is now on academic qualifications and use of academic language [...] we are moving away from trainee therapists focusing on their own personal process which in my opinion is what enables us to heal others."
- "I am concerned that there is a growing tendency to place academic prowess above clinical ability - there is a danger that institutes will produce first-class theorists and academics who are lauded for their intellects, but who in reality may pass unnoticed as they fall short when faced with the practical task of working with clients."
- "The current research training in psychotherapeutic programmes is still dominated by those who have PhDs. There is still a 'top dog' and 'under-dog' attitude. There are excellent practitioners, who do practitioner research and are dismissed by academics."

These statements seem powerful and unambiguous. There is a real perception that the psychotherapy profession is too concerned with academic prowess and academic language. The language is either too academic, technical or laden with statistics. One significant consequence is the perception of a diminished focus on the development of clinical skills. The current approach and style of academic writing within



psychotherapy is an actively divisive factor and, paradoxically, one that inhibits the dissemination of knowledge amongst practitioners.

## Fear and Lack of Confidence

Within the qualitative data the word fear appeared several times in terms of:

- Fear of not being able to write to the required standard
- Fear of negative evaluation
- Fear of criticism or doing harm or being found out to be a rubbish therapist and others are better than me
- Fear of being rejected
- Fear of failure and peer judgement

That practitioners express a lack of confidence is perhaps an understandable feeling by those with little or no experience of academic writing. But the comments above seem to be acknowledging a far more brittle experience, namely, the possibility of feeling shame or humiliation.

## Lack of Knowledge and Support

Within the qualitative data, the need to acquire writing skills through training, and a need for support, were referenced prominently.

- “Would like to, but would need a mentor / supervisor in order to feel more confident.”
- “I enjoy writing, research and academic writing. Yet, to become part of the writing community seems daunting and there seems to be very little support out there for publishing one's work, even one's doctoral thesis”.
- “I would love to write more, both academically and for public consumption, but I don't know what is expected and I don't feel prepared for it.”
- “More could be done to support writers (if they are interested) on courses.”
- “I am a practitioner with nearly 20 years of experience, my background was not academia having left school a long while ago with just 3 'O' levels. It would have been very helpful to me if academic writing as a skill had been part of my psychotherapy training e.g. how to undertake a thorough and specific literature search and how to critique articles. I have learned over time but as a sole practitioner it has been and is difficult.”
- “I feel that students of psychotherapy and counselling trainings do not do/read/critically analyse enough

research (in my experience as a Masters' course lecturer and supervisor with trainees and qualified psychotherapists and counsellors). I think that critical analysis ought to be a core topic on all trainings.”

These comments suggest that more practitioners would engage with academic writing in the psychotherapy profession *if* they felt supported through formal skills acquisition and with some form of collegiate support.

## Discussion

The results from the survey present a mixture of findings which sometimes contradict the established narrative that the clinical practice of many psychotherapists is not influenced by research. 88% of survey respondents indicated that their clinical practice is influenced to some extent by reading journals and articles. Another notable finding is the fact that 75% of respondents considered that they had done some formal writing activity. Thus, it would appear that writing within the psychotherapy profession is not necessarily a minority activity.

However, the free text comments, in particular, illustrate how many psychotherapists regard academic writing as something associated with fear of rejection and not being good enough. It seems clear that academic writing within the psychotherapy profession has a poor brand image. There is substantial criticism of a writing style that is viewed as unnecessarily complex, sometimes incomprehensible and one that seems to value intellectualising over clarity of expression. Many therapists seem to feel estranged from academic writing and are deterred from participation.

The relevance of academic writing for clinical practice was seen as paramount allied with clarity of expression.

It has been suggested that the relevance of academic writing for clinical practice has, in part, been compromised by the fact that a substantial amount of published research is focused on issues that are not key concerns for practitioners (Beutler, Williams, Wakefield, & Entwistle, 1995; Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996). So, apart from how the research is written and articulated, there may well be doubts for many practitioners about the very relevance of the type of research being reported.

From both quantitative and qualitative data, there were clear indications that many psychotherapists simply do not know what is involved in academic writing and how to participate. For example, the sense of fear and failure that was associated with academic writing suggests that some therapists simply do

not know that the process of submitting material to journals regularly allows for resubmission following various review stages. Similarly, they do not realise that the chances of experiencing an outright and first-time rejection are relatively small.

If academic writing is to become recognised as an activity that can attract positive participation across the breadth of the psychotherapy profession and feel inclusive rather than exclusive there is a clear need for an educative process to support practitioners. This need for education and support was clearly evidenced by the 78% of survey respondents who felt that academic writing should be a core skill in psychotherapy trainings. This particular finding suggests that there is a potential for much greater participation in academic writing within the psychotherapy profession if it is effectively supported.

For practitioners thinking of participating in academic writing, there is only a very sparse relevant literature, but some material does seem especially relevant. For example, Barker (2010) offers some useful comments and approaches around dealing with the anxieties that can be evoked by the prospect of academic writing.

It is clear that despite all our counselling training and personal therapy we are still very afraid of the potentially devastating impact of others' critique and disapproval. To be fixed in the gaze of others as wanting is to be a flawed and illegitimate person and writing fixes us in a way that is black and white, available for all to see and unchangeable once it is out there. (2011, p.99)

To overcome such feelings Barker (2011) recommends a graduated exposure model towards academic writing. The essence is to do smaller pieces of writing (e.g. case study, book review) before taking the step of embarking on a larger and more formal piece of academic writing.

From another perspective Cooper (2019) offers some valuable information about the processes involved in submitting a piece of academic writing for publication. Especially important is the need for authors to target appropriate journals and publications for what they have written. Cooper (2019) emphasises that there is an undoubted pecking order of journals and that some will be prove harder for authors to have their work accepted than others. In other words, there are some decisions to be made in this area. Cooper (2019) also offers good detail on the actual submission process for written work and the likely outcomes that an author might experience.

Perhaps the most important point about academic writing is the need for potential authors and training organisations to recognise that this activity is based on a set of specialised and inter-related skills. If this acknowledgment is not emphasised,

then it invites practitioners to believe that they have some kind of pre-existing intellectual or cognitive deficiency. Academic writing is a skill that needs to be acquired through structured learning and experience.

Most UK universities now have readily accessible academic skills support resources (e.g. The University of Goldsmiths Academic Skills Centre) which offer detailed support and advice around academic writing. For the psychotherapy profession there are good reasons why such formal support should be offered within psychotherapy trainings. Research methods is a commonly taught component in trainings. Surely a much-needed complementary training requirement is for practitioners to learn how to be effective academic writers. The potential synergy here seems obvious. As Ponterotto and Grieger have commented, "the first step in effectively communicating qualitative research is the development of strong qualitative research skills" (2007, p.409).

## Critical Evaluation

In utilising a mixed methods approach to the research one goal was to obtain findings from the on-line survey that might be generalised to the wider practitioner body of psychotherapists. The extent to which this goal was realised requires consideration of three key related issues which are: sample size, non-response bias, and sampling methodology. Non-response bias refers to the possibility that survey data are skewed because those who responded to the survey are distinctly different from those who did not. In general, it is assumed that the higher the response rate, the lower the risk of non-response bias.

The response rate for the survey was approximately 23%; this is the percentage of those invited to complete the survey who did so. How can we assess the value of a response rate of 23%? One way is to look at response rates achieved in other related surveys to get some scale of what might reasonably be achieved. For example, in the BACP 2017 membership survey the response rate was 18% (of the total membership) and the comparable figure for the UKCP 2016 membership survey was 29%. So, in terms of these two surveys, it might be concluded that the response rate of 23% for the on-line survey is not especially small and, indeed, is considerably larger than some publicised surveys such as the BACP (2016) survey of members' awareness of Female Genital Mutilation (FMG) where the response rate was 5%.

From a statistical perspective the concept of margin of error offers one way to quantify the degree of confidence that survey findings (from a sample) can be generalised to a wider population. Three key factors are involved, namely, sample

size achieved, population size and confidence level. For the psychotherapy profession the population size has to be estimated as there is no single data base that records the total number of UK psychotherapists. In previous survey-based research a generous estimate for the total number of UK therapists was set at 20,000 (McBeath, 2019). Using this figure the margin of error for the academic writing survey is +/- 6%. So, for any main survey finding, we can be 95% confident that the 'true value' will lie within 6% of the survey percentage reported.

The purposive sampling methodology used in the survey could have been a potential source of bias because it is a non-random approach and therefore individuals within the sample did not have an equal probability of being selected. But in highlighting this issue it's worth reflecting on some of the practicalities and limitations of doing research. Smith and Osborn (2008) make a key point in stating that, "it should be remembered that one always has to be pragmatic when doing research; one's sample will in part be defined by who is prepared to be included in it" (2008, p.56).

Within any large data set it is important to be vigilant to the presence of skewed data and their impact. Within the survey data there was a clear over representation of senior practitioners; for example, 45% of all survey respondents had over 12 years of clinical practice whereas 16% had 1 to 4 years of experience, and 25% had 5 to 8 years of clinical experience. The percentage for those practitioners with 9 to 12 years clinical experience was 16%. The over representation of senior practitioners was reflected in some of the main findings. For example, of the 102 responses associated with those who had written a journal article (62%) was accounted for by practitioners with more than 12 years clinical experience; the figure for practitioners with 1 to 4 years of experience was far lower at 10%.

That our sample included so many respondents with academic writing/publishing experience which is not representative of the practice field as a whole needs further comment. We can speculate that practitioners without this writing experience would have expressed more negativity, shame and scare about academic writing. Further qualitative research into perceptions and experiences of practitioners who are not academically active would be useful.

In using a mixed methods approach, there was a tacit assumption that both the quantitative and qualitative processes would be valuable in their own right but also that the combination of these processes would be complementary and would deliver a strength of meanings and interpretation which neither approach could do on its own. In reflecting upon the research methods used there was a clear sense of some process of synergy in so far as the combination of quantitative

and qualitative processes produced a sense of three-dimensional meaning.

However, the mixed methods approach used in our research had both advantages and disadvantages. Firstly, the quantitative data reported had special significance because they allow the findings to be generalised and to say something about the psychotherapy profession as a whole. This scale of data is particularly important in providing evidence that might be seen as credible in promoting change within organisations. A good example is the finding that (78%) of survey respondents think that academic writing should be a core skill in taught psychotherapy trainings.

However, the mixed methods approach did, in some respects, offer qualitative data that was restricted in depth. There was no face-to-face interaction between researchers and participants and therefore no opportunity for a two-way dynamic that could have facilitated processes of amplification, clarification and the co-creation of meaning. The qualitative data reported were unambiguously valuable, but they were a snapshot of meaning derived from an online survey. A different context might have produced different results.

There's little doubt that deeper and richer data would have emerged from a specific qualitative approach such as phenomenological research where the specific interest is, in *embodied* lived experience and the meanings held about that experience (Finlay, 2011). This sort of approach could be highly effective in discovering more about the shame and fear that many survey respondents expressed around the activity of academic writing. The depth and co-creative nature of phenomenological research has been described by Finlay (2011) as:

Phenomenological research is potentially transformative for both researcher and participant. It offers individuals the opportunity to be **witnessed** in their experience and allows them to '**give voice**' to what they are going through. It also opens new possibilities for both researcher and researched to **make sense of** the experience in focus. (2011, p.10). [*bold in the original*]

As Braun and Clarke (2006) have sought to emphasise, the researcher within the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process is very much an active creator and interpreter of knowledge and meaning. This raises the question of whether a different group of researchers would have identified and created themes with a different emphasis to those reported. How powerful was the personal-researcher lens? There is no straightforward answer to this question but there were undeniable clues that a powerful and very personal research process was active. For the author most involved in the thematic analysis process, there were several instances of an emotional and sometimes

visceral response when reading and re-reading through the qualitative data. This feeling was particularly potent when reading about individuals' fear and lack of confidence around academic writing. There was also, at times, a felt sense of resentment - against the psychotherapy profession – because some practitioners could have a sense of shame evoked around academic writing. The researcher's inner voice was saying, 'it doesn't have to be like this'.

The power and significance found within the many comments, statements and personal stories offered by research participants confirmed the clear value and depth of meaning that came from the qualitative side of the research. The survey produced clear headline statements that provided a sense of the size of a particular issue; for example, 32 % of respondents lacked confidence around academic writing. However, it was from the qualitative data that a sense of why individuals lacked confidence was revealed and, indeed, how this feeling was manifest at a personal level. So, the mixed methods approach successfully delivered both breadth and depth of data.

We found the degree of written responses interesting. We enjoyed and valued the rich responses in the survey immensely, and they changed – as mentioned, the direction of the study. We wondered if the elaborate free text responses partly related to the topic of 'writing', suggesting an interest in written communication and in exchanging texts perhaps from the start. We had however already earlier noted an ease and readiness to add extensive comments in online surveys (McBeath 2019) and wondered also if it might reflect a broader tendency, linked to general usage of internet and online platforms. This has raised questions with potential methodological implications. The mixed method approach allows for an iterative (Frost 2011; Morse 2017) process, moving back and forth with certain parallels to Constructivist Grounded theory. The literature review was for instance influenced by the new lines of enquiry opened through participant involvement via the survey and one particular respondent became an active co-researcher and steered the literature review into new directions.

## Overview and Summary

The research has clearly revealed that many psychotherapy practitioners feel estranged from academic writing which reflects both a lack of confidence in their ability to engage in this activity but also because of a negative view of the content and style of current academic writing. Prominent reasons for not engaging in academic writing included a lack of knowledge about this activity and a fear of rejection. Relevance for clinical practice and the use of clear and concise language were viewed as key elements of good academic writing.

There was a clear majority view that academic writing should be a core skill which is taught in formal psychotherapy trainings. For many practitioners, there are real difficulties in accessing sources of academic writing. Currently, academic writing within the psychotherapy profession is viewed by many as not relevant to clinical practice and has a style and content that is overly intellectual and reinforces the notion of a researcher-practitioner gap.

Unless there is more formal support for practitioners to acquire the skills that underpin academic writing and a change in focus so that academic writing appears more readable and more clinically relevant there is a discernible risk that psychotherapy researchers and practitioners will constitute different groups of people.

## Postscript

One of the contributors to this chapter, Avigail Abarbanel, was one of the 222 psychotherapists who completed the on-line survey. Her interest in the subject and some earlier writing led to her being involved in the writing of this chapter and is clear evidence that mainstream practitioners can have a vital and effective role in academic writing.

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