

Introduction to Research Methods in Counselling

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Key concepts, purposes, and common approaches for students and practitioners

1. Why Research Matters in Counselling

Purpose	What it Achieves
Evidence-based practice	Ensures interventions are grounded in proven effectiveness.
Professional accountability	Demonstrates competence to clients, employers, and regulatory bodies.
Theory development	Tests and refines counselling models and concepts.
Service improvement	Identifies gaps, informs policy, and guides program evaluation.
Ethical responsibility	Protects client welfare by avoiding untested or harmful techniques.

2. Core Research Paradigms

Paradigm	Ontology (Nature of Reality)	Epistemology (How We Know)	Typical Methods
Positivist / Quantitative	Objective, measurable reality	Knowledge through observation, measurement, statistical inference	Surveys, experiments, standardized scales
Interpretivist / Qualitative	Multiple, socially constructed realities	Knowledge through participants' meanings & contexts	Interviews, focus groups, thematic analysis
Critical / Transformative	Reality shaped by power, culture, oppression	Knowledge as a tool for social change	Action research, participatory methods, discourse analysis
Mixed-Methods	Combines elements of both	Integrates quantitative precision with qualitative depth	Sequential or concurrent designs (e.g., survey + interview)

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3. The Research Process (Step-by-Step)

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1. Identify a Problem / Research Question

- Start with a clinical observation, gap in literature, or policy need.
- Formulate a clear, focused question (e.g., “What is the impact of mindfulness-based counselling on anxiety in university students?”).

2. Review the Literature

- Systematically search databases (PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus).
- Summarise current evidence, note methodological strengths/weaknesses, and justify your study.

3. Choose a Design & Methodology

- Align the design with the research question and paradigm (e.g., RCT for efficacy, phenomenology for lived experience).
- Decide on data collection tools (questionnaires, interview guides, observation protocols).

4. Ethical Planning

- Obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) / Ethics Committee approval.
- Address informed consent, confidentiality, risk/benefit analysis, and data protection.

5. Sampling Strategy

- **Probability sampling** (random, stratified) ? enhances generalisability.
- **Non-probability sampling** (purposive, convenience, snowball) ? often used in qualitative work.
- Determine sample size (power analysis for quantitative; saturation for qualitative).

6. Data Collection

- Follow standardized procedures to minimise bias.
- Record sessions (audio/video) when appropriate and obtain permission.

7. Data Analysis

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- **Quantitative:** descriptive statistics ? inferential tests (t?tests, ANOVA, regression, multilevel modeling).

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- **Qualitative:** coding ? thematic, content, narrative, or grounded?theory analysis.
- **Mixed:** integrate datasets (e.g., triangulation, joint display).

8. Interpretation & Reporting

- Relate findings back to the research question, theory, and existing literature.
- Discuss limitations, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research.

9. Dissemination

- Publish in peer?reviewed