

# **The Handbook of Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy**

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# 1

## Introduction to Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy

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### THIS CHAPTER DISCUSSES

- The development of a pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy
- The key pillars and principles of a pluralistic approach
- Research evidence on the pluralistic approach
- The aims, content and style of the handbook

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLURALISTIC APPROACH

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The origins of the pluralistic approach to therapy were developed by Mick Cooper and John McLeod in 2006, and stemmed from the idea that all therapeutic approaches offered useful insights into how to help people therapeutically. Cooper and McLeod's views, in particular, were a reaction to what they saw as dogmatism within the counselling and psychotherapy field, and the lines that were being drawn between different therapeutic orientations. Their goal was to create and develop an approach to therapy that was flexible and suited to the needs of each individual client.

An original paper on the pluralistic approach was published in 2007, entitled 'A pluralistic framework for counselling and psychotherapy: Implications for research' (Cooper & McLeod, 2007). This article laid out the basic principles of a pluralistic approach within a research-informed context. At the same time, McLeod and Cooper developed two courses oriented around pluralistic principles: the Postgraduate Diploma in Counselling at the University of Abertay and the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Strathclyde.

Pluralistic research clinics were also established at both Abertay and Strathclyde universities. McLeod and Cooper, together and separately, began to deliver workshops on pluralistic therapy around the UK and at training events and conferences.

In early 2011, Cooper and McLeod published [OQ1] *Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy*, which provided a coherent and comprehensive introduction to the core principles and practices of a pluralistic approach. Since its publication, the book has had over 100 citations on Google Scholar and has become the standard text for pluralistic therapy. Later in 2011, the Universities Psychotherapy and Counselling Association, in association with the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education at Roehampton University, held an international conference on 'A pluralistic approach to practice? – Implications for the psychological therapies'. The papers for this conference were later published in a special issue of the *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling* (vol. 14, issue 1) (Bowen & Cooper, 2012; Cooper & McLeod, 2012; Dryden, 2012; McLeod, 2012; Miller & Willig, 2012; Ross, 2012; Thompson & Cooper, 2012; Watson, Cooper, McArthur, & McLeod, 2012). Windy Dryden, who attended the conference and authored a commentary on the main papers for this special issue, began to develop an interest in the interface between the pluralistic approach and cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). He started to work more closely with Cooper and McLeod on developing a pluralistic approach in Britain.

Since the publication of *Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy* in 2011, a number of pluralistic trainings in counselling, psychotherapy and counselling psychology have developed in the UK (see Chapter 26, this volume). In addition, several introductions to the approach have been published in counselling and psychotherapy textbooks (McLeod & Cooper, 2012, 2015; McLeod, McLeod, Cooper, & Dryden, 2014).

In the UK, the field of counselling psychology has been particularly receptive to pluralistic ideas and practices. Applications of the approach have been discussed in the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Division of Counselling Psychology (DCoP) journal, *Counselling Psychology Review* (Scott, 2014; Scott & Hanley, 2012; Wilk, 2014); and pluralistic concepts and practices have featured extensively in two recent texts: one on counselling psychology work with adolescents (Hanley, Humphrey, & Lennie, 2012) and the other on counselling psychology's contribution to therapeutic and social issues (Milton, 2010). In addition, in 2013, the BPS DCoP provided funding support for a pilot study of pluralistic therapy for depression (Cooper et al., 2015). The study, based at three research clinics in the UK – the University of the West of England, the Metanoia Institute and the University of Strathclyde – assessed the outcomes, acceptability and helpful aspects of a pluralistic therapeutic intervention for depression (see below). The pluralistic therapy for this study was delivered by trainee and qualified counselling psychologists, trained and supervised by John McLeod at the University of Abertay.

Internationally, training and talks on pluralistic practice have been delivered by McLeod and Cooper around the world, and a Master's level training in pluralistic practice has now been established in Ireland (see [OQ2] Chapter xxx, this volume). Although dissemination in the US is more sparse, the feedback-informed approach of Duncan, Miller, Sparks and colleagues (see Chapter 5, this volume) bears many similarities to the pluralistic model.

The developments outlined above convinced us that the time was right to publish a handbook on pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy, bringing together in one volume the burgeoning work that is being done in this field and acting as a foundation and catalyst for further developments.

## PILLARS AND PRINCIPLES

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Pluralism can be defined as the philosophical belief that ‘any substantial question admits of a variety of plausible but mutually conflicting responses’ (Rescher, 1993: 79). More than that, it is an ethical commitment to valuing diversity; and a wariness towards monolithic, all-consuming ‘truths’, because of the way that they can suppress individuality and difference. In respect to counselling and psychotherapy, a pluralistic approach implies that there are a variety of views that can be taken on a wide range of therapeutic issues, and that there is no inherent right or wrong way. This standpoint forms the grounds for three pillars that underpin a pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy.

The first pillar is *pluralism across orientations*. This means that a pluralistic practitioner is open to considering a variety of different ways in which clients get distressed and, correspondingly, a variety of different ways of helping them. Taking this stance poses a direct challenge to the ‘schoolism’ that has been endemic in the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

The second pillar is *pluralism across clients*. This is marked by the emphasis that is placed on recognising and celebrating diversity across clients. What follows from this is that pluralistic practitioners are keen to offer each client a bespoke approach to counselling and psychotherapy rather than one that is ‘off the peg’.

This relates closely to the third pillar of a pluralistic approach: *pluralism across perspectives*. A pluralistic therapeutic approach advocates that *both* participants in the therapeutic relationship – clients as well as practitioners – have much to offer when it comes to making decisions concerning therapeutic goals and the selection of therapy tasks and methods. This means that a pluralistic approach emphasises shared decision-making (see Chapter 4, this volume) and feedback (see Chapter 5, this volume) across clients and therapists.

These three pillars of the pluralistic approach can be summarised in the following principles:

- There is no one right way of conceptualising clients’ problems – different understandings are useful for different clients at different points in time.
- There is no one right way of practising therapy – different clients need different things at different points in time.
- Many disputes and disagreements in the therapeutic field can be resolved by taking a ‘both/and’ perspective, rather than an ‘either/or’ one.
- It is important that counsellors and psychotherapists respect each other’s work and recognise the value that it can have.

- Counsellors and psychotherapists should acknowledge and celebrate clients' diversity and uniqueness.
- Clients should be involved fully at every stage of the therapeutic process.
- Clients should be understood in terms of their strengths and resources, as well as areas of difficulty.
- Counsellors and psychotherapists should have an openness to multiple sources of knowledge on how to practise therapy: including research, personal experience and theory.
- It is important that counsellors and psychotherapists take a critical perspective on their own theory and practice: being willing to look at their own investment in a particular position and having the ability to stand back from it.

## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

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As a relatively new development in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, the evidence base for pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy is still at a nascent stage. Nevertheless, there are several lines of evidence in the psychotherapy research field that provide initial support for a pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy.

First, clients do seem to do better in therapy when it matches their preferences (Swift, Callahan, & Vollmer, 2011). More specifically, clients who receive a preferred intervention are 'between a half and a third less likely to drop out of therapy prematurely compared with clients who did not receive their preferred therapy conditions' (Swift et al., 2011: 307); and also show a small but significant increase in outcomes ( $d = 0.31$ ). This is consistent with the research in the field of shared decision-making (see Chapter 4, this volume), which shows that patients are more satisfied with their medical treatment and less likely to drop out if they are involved in making decision about their healthcare (Joosten et al., 2008; The Health Foundation, 2014).

Second, there is strong relationship between client–therapist agreement on the tasks and goals of therapy, and therapeutic outcomes (Horvath, Del Re, Fluckinger, & Symonds, 2011; Tryon & Winograd, 2011). That is, clients do best in therapy when they feel that their therapists are striving for the same therapeutic goals as they are, and are in agreement about the best therapeutic methods to be used.

Third, there is research to suggest that flexible practice, tailored to the needs of individual clients, is experienced by clients as a helpful and important aspect of therapy (Cooper et al., 2015; Perren, Godfrey, & Rowland, 2009). This is supported by quantitative research suggesting that flexibly tailored practice can, in certain instances, lead to improved outcomes and greater engagement with therapy (e.g., Jacobson et al., 1989).

Fourth, randomised controlled studies indicate that the use of systematic client feedback – which is integral to the pluralistic approach (see Chapter 5, this volume) – can lead to significantly enhanced therapeutic outcomes, particularly for

clients who might otherwise deteriorate in therapy (Lambert & Shimokawa, 2011). Indeed, feedback-informed treatments are now recognised as evidence-based programmes by the US government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

In addition, UK-based studies of a specifically pluralistic practice – both for clients with depression (Cooper et al., 2015, see above) and for a more heterogeneous sample (Cooper, 2014) – have shown that it has relatively positive outcomes, as well as good rates of engagement and retention. As indicated above, these studies have also found that most clients value the flexibility and collaborative approach that is at the core of pluralistic practice.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

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### Aims

*The Handbook of Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy* aims to be the definitive text for trainee counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists wishing to think and practise in a pluralistic way. More specifically, it hopes to provide trainees and practitioners with:

- Hands-on guidance to developing their pluralistic practice: providing the tools, skills and practice frameworks
- A step-by-step understanding of how the ideas and methods of different orientations can contribute towards a pluralistic way of working
- The tools and understandings needed to work with clients to achieve the most common goals
- The tools and understandings needed to work with clients wishing to address particular issues
- An understanding of a range of professional and practice issues that will be of significance to all therapists wanting to work in a pluralistic way.

For trainees on specifically pluralistic courses, this handbook should act as a core text across the duration of the programme and beyond. Other books will also be needed to help develop a more detailed comprehension of particular methods or understanding, but this handbook should act as an 'integrating hub' for trainees to draw together the different approaches into a coherent pluralistic framework. For trainees on other courses – integrative, eclectic or otherwise – this handbook also provides a coherent framework for integrating therapeutic understandings and practices; as well as a source of stimulation and guidance. Our hope is that more experienced practitioners will also find much in this handbook to stimulate them and to learn from: providing the most comprehensive guide, to date, to pluralistic theory and practice and its relationship to other approaches.

*The Handbook of Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy* builds on Cooper and McLeod's (2011) core text, *Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy*, but can be regarded as a 'stand alone' text. Hence, reading the 2011 text should be regarded as recommended, but not essential.

## Structure

Following this *Introduction*, the handbook is divided into four parts: Fundamentals of a pluralistic practice, Therapeutic orientations, Goals, and Professional issues.

### Part One: Fundamentals of a pluralistic practice

The chapters in Part One describe the core principles of a pluralistic approach to therapy, and discuss and illustrate their application in therapeutic practice. In Chapter 2, *Assessment and formulation in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*, McLeod and McLeod provide a framework for collaborative pluralistic assessment and case formulation, and discuss challenges and future directions. Chapter 3, by Sefi, Ersahin, and Hanley, is titled *From goals to tasks and methods*. It builds upon an understanding of assessment and formulation in pluralistic therapy by looking at the collaborative development of therapeutic goals and how these can be used to inform the selection of therapeutic tasks and methods. This theme of collaborative practice is developed in Chapter 4, *Metatherapeutic communication and shared decision-making* by Cooper, Martin, Papayianni and Dryden, which examines the ways in which therapists and clients can discuss the therapeutic process and make shared decisions. A structured feedback tool to aid this process is then discussed in Chapter 5, *Systematic feedback through the Partners for Change Outcome Monitoring System (PCOMS)*, by Duncan and Sparks. In Chapter 6, these two authors then go on to discuss a key focus of pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy, *Client strengths and resources*. In the final chapter in this part of the book, *Core counselling skills for pluralistic practice*, Cooper introduces and illustrates a range of basic counselling methods that can be used as the foundations for pluralistic practice.

### Part Two: Therapeutic orientations

Chapters in Part Two of the book explore pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy in relation to the major therapeutic orientations. These chapters have two main aims: first, to consider how these approaches align with a pluralistic perspective – in terms of areas of commonality, areas of difference and ways in which the orientation can be practised from within a pluralistic framework; second, to give an overview of the understandings and methods from these orientations that can contribute towards a pluralistic way of working. In this part of the book (Chapters 8–13), we have focused on the major therapeutic orientations: humanistic approaches (Hanley, Winter and Scott), cognitive behavioural approaches (Boucher), psychodynamic approaches (Spurling), existential

approaches (Cooper and Stumm), narrative approaches (Sundet and John McLeod), and integrative and eclectic approaches (John McLeod and SunDET).

### Part Three: Issues and goals

Part Three focuses on the most common issues and goals that clients bring to therapy, and presents a range of understandings and methods – from across the therapeutic orientations – that have been found to be helpful in supporting clients in this work. Authors of these chapters were encouraged to draw broadly from across the different therapeutic approaches; and to discuss how the different methods and understandings compare, contrast and can be integrated together. Case examples and excerpts of dialogue are used throughout the chapters to illustrate the different methods. This part of the book (Chapters 14–21) aims to address the most common issues and goals that clients bring to therapy: helping clients address depression (John McLeod), helping clients address problematic anxiety (Dryden), helping clients improve their interpersonal relationships (Barker), helping clients address grief (Neimeyer), helping clients address addictive behaviours (Mackrill and Jensen), helping clients address eating problems (McMillan), helping clients with health issues (Julia McLeod, Thurston, Smith), and helping clients who are suicidal or self-injuring (Reeves).

### Part Four: Professional issues

The chapters in the final part of this handbook address a range of professional and practice issues that will be of significance to all counsellors and psychotherapists wanting to work in a pluralistic way. In Chapter 22, *Difference and diversity in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*, Winter, Wilk, Hanley and Guo explore the meaning of difference and diversity in relation to pluralistic therapy and its therapeutic implications and impacts. In Chapter 23, entitled *Boundaries: A pluralistic perspective and illustrative case study of the patient-led approach to appointment scheduling*, Carey then discusses and illustrates a pluralistic approach to boundaries. Gabriel goes on to explore the broader concept of ethics in Chapter 24: *Ethics in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*. In Chapter 25, Creaner and Timulak discuss *Supervision in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*; and Chapter 26, by Julia McLeod, Smith and Thurston, examines *Training in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*. In the final chapter of the handbook, *Research and pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*, Hanley and Winter discuss a range of issues with respect to research and pluralism, and outline an agenda for research in relation to this framework.

## The handbook's key features

We have tried to make the content of this handbook as accessible and engaging as possible. To this end, each of the chapters is clearly structured with the following key features:



- Overview: a series of bullet points to signpost structure and coverage of the chapter
- Client examples and studies throughout the chapter to illustrate how the theory works in practice
- Use of research evidence wherever possible
- Summary at the end of the chapter of the key learning points
- Exercises/points for reflection at the end of the chapter, to facilitate discussion and student learning
- Reading suggestions for key texts, resources or websites that readers can consult if they wish to read further.

While we have suggested to authors that they use terms and concepts that have come to characterise pluralistic practice, some have preferred their own nomenclature or conceptual framework. In particular, while some authors have kept to the tripartite structure of ‘goals’, ‘tasks’ and ‘methods’ (see Chapter 3, this volume), others have preferred to merge the concepts of ‘tasks’ and ‘methods’. This demonstrates another hallmark of the pluralistic development in counselling and psychotherapy: its ability to contain different views on pluralistic practice.

## SUMMARY

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The pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy was developed in the mid-2000s by John McLeod and Mick Cooper, and since then has attracted broad interest from across the counselling, psychotherapy and counselling psychology fields. Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy has three key pillars – pluralism across orientations, pluralism across clients, and pluralism across perspectives – and these can be expressed in a number of core principles. Pluralistic practice is supported by several lines of research evidence, with an emerging body of empirical evidence for pluralistic therapy itself. This handbook aims to be the definitive text for pluralistic trainees and practitioners and those interested in this new development. It is divided into four parts which look at: the foundations of the pluralistic approach; its relationship to key orientations; therapeutic practices that can help clients address key issues and goals; and key professional issues for pluralistic practitioners.

## EXERCISES/POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 What attracted you to this book and/or the concept of pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy?
- 2 What are your goals in consulting the chapters in this book?
- 3 What doubts, reservations and objections may you have to pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy?
- 4 What strengths do you have as a counsellor or psychotherapist that you might bring to pluralistic practice?

You may find it useful to note down your answers to these questions and keep them in mind as you work your way through this handbook.

We would appreciate any feedback that you have on this handbook, that might help us improve future editions. [OQ3]

### FURTHER READING

Cooper, M., & McLeod, J. (2011). *Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage. The core text on pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy.

Dryden, W. (2012). Pluralism in counselling and psychotherapy: personal reflections on an important development. *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 14(1), 103–111. Critical reflections on pluralistic therapy.

McLeod, J., & Cooper, M. (2015). Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy. In S. Palmer (Ed.), *The beginner's guide to counselling and psychotherapy* (2nd ed., pp. 322–332). London: Sage. Succinct introduction to the pluralistic approach.

McLeod, J., McLeod, J., Cooper, M., & Dryden, W. (2014). Pluralistic therapy. In W. Dryden & A. Reeves (Eds.), *Handbook of individual therapy* (6th ed., pp. 547–573). London: Sage. A more detailed overview of pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy and its implications for practice.

Ross, A. (2012). The new pluralism – a paradigm of pluralisms. *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 14(1), 113–119. Further critical reflections.

### Resources

[www.pluralistictherapy.com](http://www.pluralistictherapy.com) This URL takes you to a site where you can download, for free, many of the tools referred to in this handbook, along with other resources.

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