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## Client Self-instruction: A Focus for Ethogenic Research on Counselling

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### Abstract

Client self-instruction during counselling is proposed as an appropriate focus for ethogenic research. Such research would take the intentional actions of counsellors and clients as its primary subject matter, and would employ criteria of participant self-prediction and self-control, and the validity criteria of researcher prediction and control. Philosophical and historical background of these ideas is summarized, and research questions, methods, and designs are proposed and illustrated. It is suggested that adoption of the theoretical and methodological perspectives presented might lead to a closer dialogue between scientists and practitioners in counselling psychology.

### Résumé

L'auto-apprentissage par le client, au cours de sessions de counseling, est proposé comme une orientation adéquate en ce qui concerne la recherche éthnogénique. Ce type de recherche prendrait les actions intentionnelles des conseillers et des clients comme sujet de base. Il utiliserait les critères de prédiction de soi et de contrôle de soi du participant, et le critère de validité de prédiction et de contrôle du chercheur. La formation philosophique et historique de ces idées est résumé, et, les questions, les méthodes et les modèles de recherche sont proposés et illustrés. Il est suggéré que l'adoption des perspectives théoriques et méthodologiques présentées pourraient conduire à un dialogue entre les scientifiques et les praticiens en psychologie du counseling.

Teaching somebody a kind of psychology which systematically fails to connect with their experience is like teaching someone to paint with their eyes shut. After a period of hard training they become better at this curious knack, and the trained shut-eyed painters do much better than mere beginners. All might go on swimmingly, except that someone is bound to come along and point out that it is much better to paint with one's eyes open. (Harre, Clarke, and De Carlo, 1985, pp. 18-19)

The pieces of the jigsaw accumulate in journals, despite the fact that a *real* jigsaw can only be made by taking a picture and cutting it up into pieces, not by making pieces and hoping they will form a picture. (Harre, et al., 1985, p. 61)

Recent work in the philosophy of science has highlighted the value-laden, theory-driven nature of all science, and has led to a re-examination of widely-accepted validity criteria used to adjudicate scientific progress (e.g., Kuhn, 1962; Lakatos, 1970; Laudan, 1984). Some have taken this philosophical erosion of the tenets of positivism as an oppor-

tunity to raise penetrating questions about the nature of psychological science in particular, and of human science in general (e.g., Koch, 1959; Koch & Leary, 1985; Howard, 1985a). A smaller number of philosophically-oriented psychologists have proposed alternate research paradigms, ones from more phenomenological (Giorgi, 1970), hermeneutic (Manicas & Secord, 1983), humanistic (Polkinghorne, 1982), or teleological (Rychlak, 1979) perspectives.

Harre (Harre, 1984, Harre & Secord, 1972) has proposed a type of psychological research that he calls “ethogenic.” It is meant as an antidote for the methodological and theoretical narrowness he perceives in much psychological inquiry. Harre begins with an identification of what is unique about human beings (i.e., that humans are language users), and goes on to theorize about the acquisition of our language and the unique causal powers that result from this acquisition. According to Harre, humans develop language as a result of being immersed in public, collective conversations. This exposure results in linguistic rules and a private, personal language that enables individuals to construct theories about themselves. Individuals can monitor and control their own actions through self-talk (internal processes and structures of linguistic rules and conventions, together with verbally-mediated knowledge acquired through personal experiences in the social world).

While accepting the legitimacy of much of contemporary cognitive psychology, Harre believes that the study of human intentional action—the conscious formulation of complex plans and resolutions to act, in areas such as deciding, planning, reasoning, and thinking—implies social and moral considerations that receive insufficient attention. Harre’s ethogenic, or active agent, psychology, focuses on actions for which human beings can be “called to account” (Harre et al., p. 24). His ethogenic method involves an analysis of the meanings and purposes associated with human action in the social arena. The unique causal characteristics of humans means, in Harre’s view, that we are active agents who act intentionally to construct meanings in both collective-social and personal-cognitive realms, with each domain of construction exerting influence on the other.

Howard (1984, 1986) sees in the active agent model of Harre and Secord (1972) a possible way of revising research methods in applied psychology that would attend to many of the philosophical and historical concerns of Koch (1959), Polkinghorne (1982), Rychlak (1979), and others. Howard points out that all sciences now rely upon demonstrations of prediction and control of phenomena of interest by the scientist-experimenter. Howard proposes that a new warrant be introduced to psychological research. “When a subject can self-predict or self-control his or her own behavior, it should be viewed as a warrant (or grounds) for our understanding (or belief) that the behavior of interest is under the agenic control of the subject” (Howard, 1986, p. 33).

## CLIENT SELF-INSTRUCTION IN COUNSELLING

One model of counselling that might prove particularly interesting as a basis for psychological research (following Howard's proposals) is the model of client self-instruction presented by Martin (1985a). Self-instruction connotes the ability of clients to counsel themselves. The model assumes that clients set personal goals, monitor current circumstances in relation to such goals, formulate plans for moving towards those goals, and implement and evaluate actions congruent with these plans. In short — the very sort of active agency advocated by Harre and others as unique to humans. Further, it may readily be seen that processes of self-prediction and self-control are essential to any act of self-instruction. (While initially developed from a humanistic cognitive-behavioural framework, self-instructional counselling focuses primarily on ethogenic [or intentionally-initiated, morally-accountable] actions that must be understood from clients' personal systems of meaning.) Consequently, the ethogenic psychology of Harre, Howard, and others seems to be an appropriate theoretical framework within which to elaborate the self-instructional approach.

To study client self-instruction logically implies an attempt to obtain information about clients' goals, plans, intentions, actions, interpretations, and appraisals. From such data it should be possible to assess (with clients' co-operation) the extent of client self-prediction and self-control of counselling processes as well as outcomes in relation to experimenter prediction and control of these same phenomena. In this way, research on client self-instruction might extend understanding from existing research on counselling in precisely the ways envisioned by Howard (1984, 1986).

The client's social processing of information would provide a basis for the counsellor to comprehend and construct theories and hypotheses that might be employed to facilitate appropriate client change. From the client's point of view, this social processing would provide a basis for performance targeted at achieving his or her goals. The roles and work of counsellor and client interact at both social and cognitive levels, but are not identical. In the language of self-instruction, the counsellor attempts to help the client to acquire self-instruction competence, while the client attempts to self-instruct.

## ETHOGENIC RESEARCH ON CLIENT SELF-INSTRUCTION

Ethogenic research (see Harre, Clarke, and De Carlo, 1985) examines meanings and purposes associated with intentional human action in social contexts. This section indicates how ethogenic research on client self-instruction in counselling might be conducted. In what follows, I first describe methods that might be employed to access the public, and then personal variables involved in social and cognitive processes of

information processing and construction in counselling. I will also consider the kinds of research questions that follow from the adoption of an active agent conceptualization of participant actions in counselling, and the types of research designs that might be employed in response to such questions.

### *Research Methods*

A wide variety of methods have been employed in research on counselling to access and represent the public, social, actions of counsellors and clients. Among the more widely employed systems for coding and classifying counsellor and/or client responses are systems developed by Hill (Hill, 1978; Hill et al., 1981), Stiles (1978), and Elliott (1985). Most of these systems are not explicitly concerned with inferring and interpreting the unique personal meanings and purposes associated with the responses they categorize and code. Rather, their use is more typically associated with attempts to recognize patterns of social acts associated with particular forms of counselling, or with attempts to describe generic features of therapeutic language (see Small & Manthei, 1986).

More open-ended ethnographic descriptions of social acts in counselling, methods frequently associated with ethogenic investigations in other areas (see Harre, Clarke, and De Carlo, 1985) have been employed infrequently in the published research literature of counselling psychology. However, such methods, perhaps together with more traditional methods, might prove useful. Patton's (1984) attempt to formulate a phenomenological analysis of discourse in counselling represents one potential point of departure for work of this general kind. Another, rather different approach, is the cognitive task-analytic, events paradigm promoted by Rice and Greenberg (1984). These researchers clearly recognize that counselling processes vary over time and people, and have different, unique meanings in different contexts. The work of Rice and Greenberg, and Patton, demonstrates how detailed analyses of ordinary language at the public-collective level can be used to develop models of cognitive-personal information processing and construction.

Less attention has been paid to the level of cognitive-personal construction than to the level of social-public construction. It is quite clear that the vast majority of research methods have either ignored personal cognitive variables, or used indirect, detached methods of probing the cognitive activity of counsellors and/or clients. Rating forms or standardized questionnaires—typically administered under conditions manufactured by researchers (see Martin, 1984). However, all of this is beginning to change.

Studies by Elliott (1985), Hill (Hill & O'Grady, 1985; Fuller & Hill, 1985), and Martin, Martin, Meyer, and Slemmon (1986) recently used methods of interpersonal process recall (Kagan, 1975), and stimulated

recall (Martin, 1984) to gain access to participant intentions and perceptions: "More open-ended forms of these methods might yield data documenting participant accounts of their own actions that could be subjected to 'account analyses' of the sort advocated by Harre et al., (1985)." Thought-listing and think-aloud methods (see Merluzzi, Glass, & Genest, 1981), that may or may not be combined with recall procedures, have been used to gain more direct access to ongoing cognitive processes and contents from which attitudes, beliefs, and patterns of thinking might be inferred.

Martin (1985b) has suggested a method of free association and conceptual mapping (the Bristol Board Technique) to access and represent the knowledge of clients about their problems and themselves. Another method that attempts to access internal knowledge organizations is the repertory-grid technique, originally developed by Kelly (1955) and used extensively in research on counselling by Neimeyer (Neimeyer, 1986, Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1981). The repertory-grid is advocated as a valuable ethogenic research methodology by Harre, Clarke, and De Carlo (1985).

Finally, methods of intensive autobiographical interviewing or "story-telling" are beginning to be used to obtain a more global view of participant experiences (e.g., Howard, 1985c). These methods are very flexible and are not constrained by the fixed spatial and temporal boundaries that limit most other data gathering methods.

While methods that probe the cognitive-personal constructions of participants in counselling are extremely diverse, they all are based upon the belief of a new generation of counselling/therapy researchers: that we must obtain a richer, fuller description of that which we are attempting to understand. Following Koch (1959), the underlying intention of these methods is to clarify what is unique, and therefore worth studying, about human experience in counselling/therapy.

### *Research Questions and Designs*

What kinds of questions might guide research on counselling that adopts ethogenic perspectives and methods in attempting to understand client active agency (self-instruction) in counselling? The following list hopefully will indicate the richness and variety of such inquiry.

- a) How do clients attempt to self-instruct (in the sense of active, purposeful learning from counselling) during counselling? What strategies do they use?
- b) How does client knowledge (episodic, declarative, and procedural) change over time in counselling to better support the performance of self-instructional strategies?

- c) Is there a relationship between client self-instruction and the types of intervention strategies/approaches employed by counsellors? Do some counselling methods foster or permit client self-instruction more than others?
- d) How does the counsellor's knowledge of the client and her or his problems change over time in counselling? How do shifts in this knowledge relate to shifts in the client's knowledge? (Perhaps complementary shifts in participant knowledge of clients and their problems will provide an exciting basis for theorizing about the nature of empathic understanding and its role in counselling.)
- e) How do events in the personal-cognitive processing and construction of information relate to events in the public-social processing and construction of information during counselling? Is the interactive, verbal behaviour of participants a useful guide to their personal, cognitive processing and construction of information?
- f) What portion of the variance in counselling outcomes can be related to predictions made by experimenters from their experimental measures and methods, and what portion of outcome variance can be related to the predictions and volitional control attempts of clients and counsellors?

Clearly, studies that probe such questions must incorporate methods for accessing and representing both the social-public and cognitive-personal processing and construction of information throughout counselling. Consequently, methods such as those reviewed earlier in this section will find a place in such studies. I believe that a mix of traditional, extensive designs, and innovative, intensive designs will furnish reliable and valid information that increases our understanding of client self-instruction in counselling. The former are well-known to most psychologists, so I have little to say about them, except that the necessity of collecting data on cognitive-personal variables undoubtedly will necessitate a greater attempt on the part of researchers to comprehend client/counsellor purposes and perspectives than has been the case.

Intensive designs might include descriptive-process case studies of participant-talk (e.g., Hill, Carter, & O'Farrell, 1983), perhaps supplemented with the kind of action and account analyses suggested and illustrated by Harre, Clarke, and De Carlo (1985). Designs that depend upon alternating sequences of empirical and rational analyses and detailed cognitive modeling of therapeutic phenomena, such as the events paradigm research advocated by Rice and Greenberg (1984), also might prove extremely useful. Finally, designs that involve close collaboration between researchers and counsellors/clients, such as intensive, qualitative reconstructions of therapeutic experiences through

open-ended interpersonal process recall (see Rennie, 1985), might help to capture and conserve the meanings that participants attach to their experiences.

What is common to the various research methods and designs briefly surveyed here is that they all are capable of contributing to an understanding of the participant's experience in counselling. Research along these lines has potential for elaborating and informing models of self-instruction that do view clients and counsellors as active agents.

### *An Example*

A brief description of a research program currently being undertaken by members of the Counselling Psychology Research Group at The University of Western Ontario illustrates the kind of ethogenic research on client self-instruction in counselling I describe. The goals of this project are to provide initial data relevant to the research questions listed earlier. All data is collected from videotapes of unstaged individual counselling sessions, and from audiotapes and other permanent records of counsellor and client responses to stimulated recall, interview, and free association/conceptual mapping (Martin's Bristol Board Technique) tasks. These were completed by counsellors and clients immediately following the counselling sessions.

The stimulated recall tasks in these experiments asked clients to describe any conscious strategies they used to learn from counselling events, while they viewed videotaped replays of just-completed sessions. On similar tasks, counsellors were asked to comment on their intentions for client self-instructional activity. At the conclusion of each stimulated recall interview, counsellors and clients were asked to predict the likelihood of therapeutic success by making a variety of self-predictions in relation to the various counselling goals and sub-goals specific to each counselling dyad.

Finally, both counsellors and clients are asked to free associate to 'key' words arising from the client (as an individual), the client's problems/concerns, and possible solutions/resolutions of these problems/concerns. Free-associate responses to each key word are recorded on small "post-it" squares that are returned to the "free associater" to arrange on laminated sheets of bristol board in ways that represent their self-perceived cognitive organizations of these concepts. Participants accomplish this by using physical proximity, connecting lines, and cluster-labels to suggest different levels of organization among the free-associate concepts.

The videotape, stimulated recall, self-prediction, and bristol board data permits researchers to focus on many things: the self-reported, self-instructional strategies employed by clients; the relationship of these strategies to the therapeutic intentions and practices of counsellors; the personal knowledge of clients about themselves and their problems/

concerns during each session and across sessions; and the relationships between such client knowledge and that of counsellors concerning clients and their problems/concerns. The data also permits investigating relationships between the verbal dialogue (social construction and processing of information) and the personal knowledge (cognitive construction and processing of information) of participating counsellors and clients. Finally, client, counsellor, and researcher predictions of therapeutic success can be compared.

In its concern for capturing personal meanings, intentions, predictions, and strategic attempts to exert personal agency, the research being conducted at Western Ontario exemplifies the tenets of ethogenic research as described in this article. The concern for preserving naturalistic language data in both public-social and private-cognitive levels is modelled after the general ethogenic research paradigm described by Harre, Clarke, and De Carlo (1985). As an example of ethogenic research on client self-instruction in counselling, it hopefully makes many of the issues and methods I've described more concrete.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Using participant self-prediction and self-control as validity criteria, in addition to experimenter prediction and control (Howard, 1984, 1986), is a crucial feature of the research proposed. When this is attempted, it seems clear that traditional distancing of researchers of counselling from the clients/counsellors they study is reduced. The efforts of researchers to understand participants' perceptions, thoughts, and intentions encourages dialogue between researchers and subjects of research. Like Howard (1985b, 1986), I believe that dialogue is central to ethogenic research in human science, and that it holds the promise for bridging gaps between psychological research and practice.

To illustrate, I draw from my own experience in using the method of free association and conceptual mapping discussed by Martin (1985b) to study the meanings clients attach to their experiences in counselling. Not only has this method provided a wealth of information about the personal constructions of clients, but it also has proved to be a useful therapeutic tool. Clients who have participated in this research frequently comment on the therapeutic value of the method in assisting them to better understand their own perceptions and conceptualizations.

Perhaps realization of a long-sought goal lies in merging the purposes and intentions of the psychologist as researcher and as therapist. Attempting to understand how clients actively learn and change through counselling seems to be an appropriate goal for counselling psychology scientists-practitioners. Widening the eyes of the researcher by sharing the vision of the practitioner is an idea whose time has come.

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