



Figure 6. Example of an ulterior transaction

to change the sequence: for example, changing conversations at work from a confrontational Parent to Child to a cooperative Adult to Adult response.

The left-hand pair of stacked circles shows transactions that may continue indefinitely (when the vectors are drawn in parallel, or shown as complementary to each other) unless interrupted. The right-hand pair show where the stimulus intention is 'crossed' by the response, to invite the first speaker into Adult instead of Parent.

Figure 6 shows a covert (or 'ulterior') message as a response. This diagram is very useful as it enables both overt and covert messages to be clearly shown alongside one another.

## Conclusion

I hope this brief review of some ways in which the TA concept of ego states can be applied in the workplace has encouraged readers to revisit what TA has to offer.

Qualified TA practitioners specialising in all four fields of application (psychotherapy, counselling, educational and organisational) may be found via two UK websites: [www.ita.org.uk](http://www.ita.org.uk) and [www.institda.org.uk](http://www.institda.org.uk) ■

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# Qualitative approach

**Chris Athanasiades** and **Allan Winthrop** propose a systematic research methodology

There is a general acknowledgement of the usefulness of workplace counselling, however there is little understanding about why it is useful or the ways in which it is useful'. McLeod and McLeod<sup>2</sup> assert that further evidence is needed with regards to:

*Which counselling approaches are most appropriate in the workplace setting? Under what conditions is it best to utilise in-house or external models of service provision? Are there different client needs (and counselling interventions) associated with gender, patterns of sickness absence or job role? What impact does organisational culture have on counselling utilisation and effectiveness?*

Hill<sup>1</sup> concedes that research into workplace counselling has not had much success in addressing these issues because workplace counselling has been looked at from the perspective of the medical model which is rather limiting in its outlook. On corollary, the methodologies that have been used have been trying to locate change within the individual employee. However, employees are part of dynamic organisations and change should be viewed within the wider context of organisational change and development. On the basis of this, it would be reasonable to suggest that research in workplace counselling would benefit from the use of appropriate methodologies that are able to capture the richness of employee experiences. Qualitative approaches are credited with the ability to provide fuller and denser accounts of people's experiences<sup>3</sup>. In recognition of this, there has been a call for the use of more such approaches in counselling and psychotherapy research<sup>4</sup>, as well as in the area of work psychology<sup>5</sup> including workplace counselling<sup>6</sup>.

Qualitative research is a prolific area and further reading is required if one is to obtain a comprehensive overview of it. The ideas put forward in this paper mainly relate to social constructionism a popular type of interpretative qualitative research.

## A case for qualitative research in workplace counselling

The perusal of journal articles attests to the dominance of experimental studies in published research<sup>7</sup>. Experimental studies concentrate on the acquisition of numerical and statistical evidence in the wider

# Issues in workplace counselling research

context of quantification. Quantification aims to unveil objective reality which is assumed to be out there and which is assumed to be able to be measured reliably through questionnaires or other experimental tools of the scientific method. However, this is an uneasy thought if one is to take the perspective that statistics provide a partial view into human experience. Henwood and Nicolson<sup>8</sup> postulate that 'meanings – including lay and scientific knowledge of the world – do not merely reflect the world as it exists, but are produced or constructed by persons and within cultural, social and historical relationships'. On the basis of this, adherence to quantification as a form of inquiry has limited the consideration of the social construction of meaning<sup>9</sup>.

It is reasonable to say that employees make sense of their working and personal lives through their interaction with their world. In qualitative terms, a fuller and denser understanding of people's experiences would require an understanding of the interaction between people and their social environment<sup>3</sup>. This position also points to the awareness that different employees may have different experiences as their realities are co-constructed by different people (colleagues, employers, family members and so on).

Unlike the empirical paradigm, which focuses on objectivity, qualitative research cherishes subjective experiences and emphasises the importance of language as a medium through which social life is constructed<sup>10</sup>. People use language to mediate their experiences, therefore 'meanings – including lay and scientific knowledge of the world – do not merely reflect the world as it exists, but are produced or constructed by persons and within cultural, social and historical relationships'<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, it becomes imperative for social science to be 'sensitive to people's own understandings as seen from their local frames of reference'<sup>9</sup>. This enables qualitative research to generate rather than test theory, the latter being the domain of empiricism<sup>11</sup>. On the basis of this, the importance of language becomes central to the work of the social scientists and to the aims of social research<sup>9</sup>.

In contrast to the quantitative approach, where replicability is thought to be one of the strengths of a quantitative study, qualitative research sees behaviour as dynamic and ever changing and so not yielding itself to replicability. Additionally, Schou and Hewison<sup>12</sup> assert that qualitative analysis produces different versions of the researched depending on the perspective advocated by different researchers.

One version does not disprove an earlier one, rather it contributes to the continuing conversation between versions. Due to this emphasis that qualitative research places on multiple 'versions', consensus in the positivist sense of inter-rater reliability is not of importance. Objectivity is not an espoused principle. Instead qualitative researchers argue that there is always going to be a difference between our observations and the observed (what actually happens). This is also augmented by the fact that theories of social events are constructed within and sustained by social groups of scientists who share systems of beliefs and systems of meaning<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, issues such as generalisability and replicability are not of interest to qualitative research.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is inductive and does not impose predetermined categories upon the data<sup>8</sup>. Inductive approaches endeavour to obtain the uniqueness and intricacies of events in real life contexts and this is a major strength of qualitative research<sup>13</sup>. The goal of the researcher is to extract meaning from the data often with help from the participants or external auditors<sup>8</sup>. This helps capture the uniqueness and intricacies of events in real-life contexts<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, qualitative research is more interested in studying the experiences of a sample of employees who are thought to hold views/attitudes that are of interest to the research aims rather than on the generalisability of the research findings<sup>8</sup>. In practical terms, qualitative research focuses on non-numerical analyses of verbal, written or visual material<sup>8</sup>.

It has been argued that in qualitative research knowledge is co-constructed<sup>14</sup>. The goal of the researcher is to extract meaning from the data often with help from the participants or external auditors. In addition, qualitative research is inductive and does not impose predetermined categories upon the data. As qualitative research constitutes a marked departure from the aims and procedures of quantification, concepts such as validity and reliability, which are thought to safeguard the quality of quantitative research, are not compatible with qualitative methodologies. The question arises, then, as to how qualitative research ascertains the quality of its findings.

## Quality in qualitative research

Parker<sup>10</sup> proposes three main ways in which qualitative research attempts to improve the trustworthiness of research findings and promote social science research by providing alternative ways of acquiring

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knowledge about social worlds:

■ **Indexicality.** All meaning is indexical. Explanations change as the occasion changes. The best way to deal with this change is to theorise it. The aim of qualitative research is specificity and not replicability as behaviour is seen as dynamic and therefore not replicable. Sample size is not important in qualitative research. Large samples lose specificity.

■ **Inconcludability.** Qualitative research involves the interpretation of accounts of action and experience by the researcher. There is always going to be a gap between meanings that appear in the research setting and the account written in the report.

■ **Reflexivity.** The ways in which we explore a problem will affect the explanations we give. Qualitative research does not aim to be objective. Subjectivity is a resource, not a problem. Characteristics of the participant or the situation may be valuable resources, not factors to be screened out. The researcher should explore his/her position in a reflexive way.

Parker<sup>10</sup> describes the above mentioned principles as ways of working through the methodological 'horrors' of research and transforming these into 'virtues'. Additionally, it has been argued that quality in qualitative research is achieved through a rigorous and transparent analytic process. This goal is aided by the availability of all analysis documentation which facilitates scrutiny by peers<sup>15</sup>. Finally, irrespective of how well a research project has been conducted, not much good will come out of research if research is not in a position to offer suggestions for practice and for further research. 'Usefulness of research' is an important criterion in qualitative research. Schou and Hewison<sup>12</sup> eloquently summarise this criterion in the following extract from their paper:

*'Valid' and useful research in an interpretivist paradigm should produce versions of the social world or worlds under investigation that can 'speak to' the versions of others in similar contexts, inform practice, operate as a catalyst for further discussion or debate, open up new ways of seeing in some specific context, and provide workable explanations that can then be used (critically and dynamically with other explanations) in the arena of practice, to name several areas of 'usefulness' for such research.*

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that qualitative approaches can make a positive contribution in the area of workplace counselling research. The epistemological positions and the rigorous methods of qualitative research are attuned to the quest for an in-depth

analysis of the experiences of workplace counselling clients. It is suggested that qualitative approaches can help research in this area make substantial progress in the discovery of new knowledge with regards to the components of workplace counselling that make workplace interventions effective and it can help identify any additional components which would improve the benefits of workplace counselling for employees and employers. Therefore, this paper concludes with the suggestion that research in workplace counselling could benefit significantly from the use of appropriate qualitative approaches. ■

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