

# Studying the Therapeutic Process by Observing Clinicians' In-Session Behaviour

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This paper presents a further step in the use and validation of a systematic, functional-analytic method of describing psychologists' verbal behaviour during therapy. We observed recordings from 92 clinical sessions of 19 adults (14 women and 5 men of Caucasian origin, with ages ranging from 19 to 51 years) treated by nine cognitive-behavioural therapists (eight women and one man, Caucasian as well, with ages ranging from 25 to 48 years). The therapists' verbal behaviour was codified and then classified according to its possible functionality. A cluster analysis of the data, followed by a discriminant analysis, showed that the therapists' verbal behaviour tended to aggregate around four types of session differentiated by their clinical objective (assessment, explanation, treatment and consolidation). These results confirm the validity of our method and enable us to further describe clinical phenomena by distinguishing psychologists' classes of clinically relevant activities. Specific learning mechanisms may be responsible for clinical change within each class. These issues should be analysed more closely when explaining therapeutic phenomena and when developing more effective forms of clinical intervention. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Key Practitioner Message:

- We described therapists' verbal behaviour in a focused fashion so as to develop new research methods that evaluate psychological work moment by moment.
- We performed a cluster analysis in order to evaluate how the therapists' verbal behaviour was distributed throughout the intervention. A discriminant analysis gave us further information about the statistical significance and possible nature of the clusters we observed.
- The therapists' verbal behaviour depended on current clinical objectives and could be classified into four classes of clinically relevant activities: evaluation, explanation, treatment and consolidation.
- Some of the therapist's verbalizations were more important than others when carrying out these clinically relevant activities.
- The distribution of the therapists' verbal behaviour across classes may provide us with clues regarding the functionality of their in-session verbal behaviour.

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This study represents another step in the research programme that our group started about 10 years ago (Froján-Parga, Montaña-Fidalgo, & Calero-Elvira, 2006). The ultimate objective of our research programme is an in-depth analysis of the therapeutic process that would clarify its nature and mechanisms. From our perspective, reaching this objective entails identifying the learning processes that take place during the client-therapist interaction and contribute to clinical change. Elucidating these mechanisms of change could bring about a better

understanding of why people change in therapy and could promote the development of more effective clinical strategies. With this objective in mind, we have undertaken the lengthy task of analysing therapeutic interactions step by step, focusing on the therapist's verbal behaviour in the first place, then on the client's and finally on the interaction between therapist and client. Previous studies (Virués-Ortega, Montaña-Fidalgo, Froján-Parga, & Calero-Elvira, 2011) concerned multiple dyads observed in clinical settings; here, we take this approach one step further with a new study and a wider sample.

Throughout the last decades, several studies, literature reviews and meta-analyses have aimed at clarifying the therapeutic process, but they have yielded no definitive evidence as to how or why clinical interventions produce

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