Commentary: New Pluralistic Strategies for Research in Clinical Practice

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Introduction

The Spandler and Warner paper draws on the 'triangle of communication' to develop the FIND framework for research and to promote and support new ways of gathering evidence for the development of strategies of evaluation, intervention and treatment in clinical psychology. The framework offers a series of questions with which to focus equally on the contributions of Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour to experiences of individuals. It gathers qualitative evidence about cognitive and emotional aspects of experience that supplements quantitative measures of behaviour and allows for a more holistic, principle-based development of 'compassionate strategies of support and care' (pg xx). The authors propose an 'action research' approach to gathering data that encourages ongoing data collection and an openness to clinical interventions being informed and shaped by what the evaluation indicates. Their approach promotes flexibility in treatment and interventions and provides the potential for services to be tailored to individual needs.

Qualitative data use brings context, subjectivitity and individual insight to the understanding of human experience by enriching and 'thickening' it (Geertz, 1973). Warner and Spandler's approach seeks to exploit these qualities through mixed-method data collection that gathers emotional and cognitive data whilst also bringing nuance to behavioural data. This model moves the focus of the research away from simple outcome measures and allows new understandings of what outcome and change can mean, both to the individual and across services (e.g. Howard, 1983; McLeod, 2005).

The issue of ensuring credible research outcomes from pluralistic and single method research is a serious consideration for qualitative researchers contributing to policymaking, service development and furthering understanding of other topics. The FIND model seeks to address the concern of

qualitative and clinical psychology researchers of how to incorporate usefully the subjective meaning brought by participants and researchers into high quality and meaningful research. In the clinical psychology context this means finding a way to include individual intent and meaning in behaviour, (Spandler and Warner discuss it in relation to self-harming behaviour in the paper), whilst also ensuring the research is of relevance.

The use of pluralistic approaches to data collection, methodology and interpretation gives rise to debates about the creative tensions and benefits they bring (Burck, 2005; Mason, 2006; Lyons &Coyle, 2007; Madill & Gough, 2009). Concerns about combining epistemologies have been identified (e.g. Edley, 200x) but with the end of the 'paradigm wars' (Oakley, 1999; Bryman, 2006) pluralistic approaches also provide a pragmatic adherence to moving beyond the constraints of adopting just one epistemological or ontological position. They offer an 'agnostic' position, where pragmatism (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005) means that 'epistemology and ontological issues have been marginalised to a significant extent' (Bryman, 2007: 17). The focus instead is on linking the approach adopted to the purpose of the research and the nature of the research question (Creswell, 2003). The FIND model provides an example of addressing the need for attention to be paid to the individual's experience, in this instance of perceived power and control they have in different settings and contexts.

A pluralistic approach allows for resulting constructions of participants and their behaviour to be more salient and loyal to the different positions of their lived identities rather than constructions of them derived by using one analytical approach or data source. Tapping into the various dimensions of lived experience does not limit participants to being constructivist, phenomenological, positivist or post-modern subjects alone. Instead the pluralistic approach offers the possibility of participants being all, some or none of these, depending on their context and situation.

Spandler and Warner's paper addresses the assumptions made by focussing on treatments arising from using predetermined outcomes as measures of success. They use the example of the cessation of the self-harming behaviour. The FIND model allows for emotional aspects of evaluation by 'making more of feelings' (Pg xx). They focus on the contextualisation brought by the approach that allows for exploration of the range of areas that specifically relate to clients' sense of 'power and control'. They highlight the differing impacts of settings and life circumstances on individuals to show how the development of series of questions can provide insight to the centrality of power and control issues in individuals' perspectives. Examining this central tenet from many perspectives allows for a shift away from the evaluation of individuals and more on ensuring necessary conditions for effective and principled practice provision. This is achieved by the triangulation of behavioural, cognitive and emotional data.

Triangulation in this sense is not searching for one meaning, as perhaps it might be when used in a purely quantitative approach. Warner and Spandler instead use it to seek a 'comprehensive, robust and meaningful picture' of the service under scrutiny. The value of this approach means that both contradiction and qualification of findings made pluralistically can be further investigated (e.g. Moran-Ellis et al, 2006; Frost, 2009) and used to add to the holistic perspective of the topic being formed.

Warner and Spandler are concerned with both quality of research and its applicability. They point out that the applicability is always limited by the 'quality of thinking that various stakeholders bring to it.' (Pg xxx).

Applicability is addressed in the multi-level approach of the FIND model by blurring boundaries between research, evaluation and clinical practice. Its outcomes are then of interest to service users

and practitioners and can feed into large-scale research that influences policy and practice development.

The multi-layered approach of the FIND model extends applicability by allowing for a variety of meanings to emerge. Different layers may be of interest to researchers asking different questions (Frost, 2009). Taken together they can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (here self-harming behaviour). The 'interpretative pluralism' (Coyle, forthcoming) inherent in this approach seem particularly relevant to exploration of phenomena that have different meanings to different individuals. Spandler and Warner highlight that by overlooking intent and meaning behind behaviour, evidence based practice emerging from the research risks making assumptions and imposing predetermined outcomes as measures of success. Qualitative pluralism is well-positioned to explore topics in which there is no consensus about ontological status. This may, for example, be self-harming behaviour as illustrated in the Warner and Spandler paper, or anomalous experience as explored by Adrian Coyle, (Coyle, forthcoming). When analysing data to understand individual experience from many perspectives the illumination of different meanings allows each to be taken singly to address specific research questions, and for all to be taken together to provide a multi-dimensional insight to one person's experience. The evidence that emerges from the approach provides a variety of ways to understand (and therefore develop strategies to address) behaviours and experiences. Thus pluralistic approaches such as this one in clinical settings provide a means by which researchers can embrace 'curiosity', as advocated by systemic therapists (Cecchin, 1987), in the multifaceted complexity of human experience.

This paper shows that a pluralistic approach to gathering and exploring data, such as the FIND model , can offer a respectful, credible and robust way of developing strategies for research and for clinical practice. It elevates the data to a position that enables it to signpost findings relevant to

different audiences whilst retaining interrogation of the data in a bottom-up, grounded approach. The FIND model offers a way to achieve this with a flexibility and transparency that can serve to promote interest and trust in the robustness of the research whilst serving the needs and desires of those who provide the data.

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