Make research training have meaning
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DR SALMA SIDDIQUE believes that in TA training we are not asking ourselves the right questions about how to use research, or what kind of relationship we would like to have with research.

AFTER REFLECTING ON the previous issue’s article by Pietro Cardile (2011) on his thoughts, suggestions and reflections on the state of the relationship between therapy and training, I would suggest that TA training also needs to consider the current approaches to the teaching and application of research within its field.

The teaching of research within the discipline of TA training seems poorly integrated. A number of trainees have asked me to point out the very basic information they need to know to pass their research module or complete the proposal assignment. Something is lost if this is how some trainees feel about research – that it is the ‘thing to get through’. I want trainees to not only seek a technical proficiency but also to be reflexive in growing their own knowledge and evidence base for contemporary and meaningful practice.

As a researcher and practitioner, I am constantly reminded of the need for evidence-based practice to be informing me as a TA practitioner. As an academic, I am constantly informing and shaping my knowledge base through being able to discriminate different sources of information: the way it is presented (the hidden agenda of funding, institutions and disciplines); the way the argument is supported by the evidence (the persuasion in one direction over another) and the methodology (is it a discipline where quantitative over qualitative tools and approaches are considered as evidence?).

In our TA profession we are not really discussing or asking ourselves questions about how to use research, or what kind of relationship we would like to have with research. Other professions do research to build up knowledge and evidence to identify what works well and why. What about the research about effectiveness? What is lost and what is found in the process of collecting, finding, acknowledging and understanding what has gone between us? Who is doing the research and is it consensual? We would normally consider these questions as we negotiate the contract in a therapeutic relationship in accordance with the TA frame of reference. Can we not consider how we can ask these additional questions about research-making and findings to develop our practice?

I feel that we, as psychotherapists and counsellors, can bring the skills, imagination, intuition, curiosity and common sense to do research through the core of our profession. Research is nothing more or less than the stories and conversations we tell ourselves, others tell us of ourselves and we tell others about ourselves (Wolcott, 1994). And yet, somehow, we have created a mysticism about who should be telling those stories to whom. As therapists and counsellors we enter into a relationship with our clients through the period of assessment. It is at this point the research process can begin to inform us how we are going to create a therapeutic alliance. In part we do this through consulting our notes and the texts available to us. We gather the data of these conversations and discuss the findings in training, supervision, in the relationship with the client, possibly in one’s own therapy, and then arrive at an analysis through awareness and more stories and conversations about the stories and conversations. We could acknowledge more the significance of research at this point.

The recent experience of researching for my written CTA exam taught me about all the ‘things’ I didn’t include because of the fragmented pieces of narrative. An ethnographical methodological approach would have given me a clearer understanding of myself and my process of participating and observing the self in relation with the other (Siddique, 2011a). There are, at present, a limited number of research methodologies which are taught to trainee research practitioners. The most common approach is that of the case study method which focuses on an individual or a small number of individuals within a group. It operates as the descriptive account of the cause and effect relationship as a method of presenting one’s practice. The case study approach can provide an in-depth contextual account on particular individuals and their experience. In hindsight, I realised this approach can be limiting in capturing those moments of ourselves of becoming therapists and counsellors. I experienced myself in the trainee role as being restricted (in part, by the guidance) and my own expectations, by the case study method which demonstrated only a linear assemblage of abilities and failures. I wanted to describe being in the margins of the experience of the created self of the therapist/trainee/supervisee and client. This
concept of inbetween-ness (Siddique 2011b) can be useful in terms of becoming the participant–observer within your own research and contextualising your own experiences to create mutuality and to be open and transparent about the space between things.

On reflection, I wish I had felt the confidence to have chosen the research methodology which best matched my image to the reality of the task of becoming a Transactional Analyst. I would have liked to write my experiences of becoming a psychotherapist by choosing the interpretive methodology of auto-ethnography. Tierney (1998) suggests that ‘auto-ethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalised those of us at the borders’ (p66). This approach challenges the scientific paradigm of gaining an understanding of phenomena which are socially constructed, distorted and mediated within a cultural context. It allows us to be seen as researcher and the researched; a processor of questions from a wider social context; and to make meaning of events and life experience.

Berne’s (1976) example of ‘A man who buys a lottery ticket is an example of how anxious people are to make the world match their images with as little effort as possible’ (p52) is an excellent analogy of how we can easily limit ourselves to what is expected without questioning alternative approaches which might enhance the process and make for a better fit. Rather the act of research is the act of opening your eyes and seeing yourself a part of what is experienced: ‘Every time I open my eyes
And every time the world takes shape
I’m invited to open my eyes
And see the world raw and naked
Holding out its hand
calling me into itself
Where I am taken into the transparency of Things
And find myself transparent there.’

Spira, 2010

Our way of understanding the world and our part in its making is through our learning, engaging and experiencing ‘an object as it is perceived by the senses’ (Kant, 1961). Research is the knowledge and understanding of how, as practitioners, we find ourselves between things. Research provides us the opportunity to be open and flexible as Berne has suggested ‘important thing in life is to understand reality and to keep changing our images to correspond to it, for it is our images which determine our actions and feelings’ (Berne, 1976, 53). If we don’t start to revisit [within our various schools of thought and training forums] what research we are teaching and conducting then we are in danger of repeating the mistakes of the dominant objective scientific method where ‘the conventions hold tremendous material and symbolic power over the researcher [and the researched]’(Richardson 2000, 7).

I received a postcard from a friend a few months after completing my foundation year of the Transactional Analysis course and was deciding to embark on the first year. I couldn’t understand the message: ‘Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck’ (Dalai Lama). I pinned the card to the wall without ever deciphering the meaning. And now post-CTA exam as I sit at my desk I have made new meaning of the message that not getting what I want(ed) in the exam process has been ‘a wonderful stroke of luck’. It has enabled me to bring more into my awareness the gaps in my own learning and process, along with different ways of enriching my practice. I would like to offer some of this process of learning with others.

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References
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