Discourse analysis and criminal justice groupwork: An empirical approach to reflexive practice

Steve Kirkwood

The University of Edinburgh

Recent research suggests that an important aspect of criminal justice social work interventions relates not simply to content of programmes, but to elements of the relationship with clients. These include: appropriate use of authority, empathy and respect; the establishment of an effective 'working alliance' based on mutual understanding; the demonstration of pro-social modelling and positive reinforcement; and the constructive management of conflict within the group. However, very little extant research has used qualitative methods to analyse these aspects of practice in action. The present research addresses this gap through applying discourse analysis to video recordings of Criminal Justice Social Work Groupwork Programmes in order to explore the elements of best practice. The analytic approach pays close attention to the interactions between people through the fine grained analysis of instances of talk. The research was undertaken in close collaboration with social workers and is intended to help build an empirical aspect into reflexive practice. The results highlight the ways in which social workers are able to build a working alliance with their clients and how this develops in on-going interactions. This approach provides social workers with the scope to develop an empirical aspect to their reflexive practices, through focusing on specific instances of interaction based on empirical data. In this regard, the research has the potential to improve training of social workers and ongoing professional development.

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