‘Normally I'd get really agitated, but I just laughed!’: What do participants reflect upon in a Transactional Analysis/Mindfulness based anger management programme?

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Abstract
Most anger management group programmes utilise Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness Based Treatments (MBT’s) in their interventions. This study uses Transactional Analysis (TA) and mindfulness within an Action Learning (AL) framework to help promote behavioural change. The paper explores how participants report phenomenological change throughout a 10-week anger management programme. The research examines participants weekly ‘check-ins’ as they reflected on their angry behaviours, their interpersonal relationships and the development of mindfulness techniques as a way to regulate their angry emotions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to help provide insight of these narratives. The research suggests participants engage in a group learning process of sharing their angry behaviours, reflecting upon the taught content of the programme before acting to change their behaviour, utilising the group to provide encouragement and support.

Keywords: Transactional Analysis (TA), mindfulness, action learning, anger management, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Introduction

Anger management group programmes have traditionally utilised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness Based Treatments (MBT’s) in their approach (Fix & Fix, 2013; Deffenbacher, 2011). Although CBT and MBT interventions are popular in the treatment of anger, their focus lies within the philosophy of behaviourism and quantitative psychology that rely upon statistical evidence and large population sample groups. Researchers seeking to deliver a more humanistic, less behaviourist way to work with this client group have few alternatives available to them, interventions which deviate from the use of quantitative outcome measures are rare, with no studies exploring participants phenomenological experiences of their time in such groups. The paucity of phenomenological studies into anger management groups effectively silences the individual voice and misses any opportunity for programmes to adapt and change in response to the participant experience.

The clinical implications of the behaviourist approach lead to anger management interventions with no methodological mechanism to respond to the changing needs of the group and the risk that programmes become less and less effective as time goes by. Traditional CBT based programmes use a ‘one-size-fits-all’ manualised approach to the management of anger and functionalist outcome measures to evaluate programme success, missing the ‘fine grain’ of the human experience. A recent meta-analysis of CBT based anger management interventions by a well-respected anger management researcher for instance, noted their variable effectiveness and called for researchers to develop new and innovative methodologies to help improve their success rates (Lee & DiGiuseppe, 2018).

Kassinove & Sukhodolsky (1995, p. 11) define anger as a transient, complex emotional process incorporating both *‘uncomfortable… experiences and… cognitions’* together with *‘automotive [bodily] reactions’* in the enactment of socially unacceptable displays of behaviour. When

individuals become angry, they tend to experience thoughts and triggering events which lead to phenomenological experiences that activate the fight-or-flight (sympathetic) response. This combination of events results in expressions of anger through verbal and/or physical actions (Eckhardt, Norlander, & Deffenbacher, 2004).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an approach loosely based on Buddhist meditative practices and was initially introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) as a method to treat chronic pain. The approach requires participants to focus their attention on their phenomenological experience whilst adopting a non-judgemental attitude to the experiences that arise (Bishop, Lau, & Shapiro, 2004). Recently researchers have found growing evidence that mindfulness may help reduce anger and aggression in a range of clients (Robins, Keng, Ekblad, & Brantley, 2012; Fix & Fix, 2013). Mindfulness practices help participants regulate emotions that may develop into angry behaviours by reducing rumination (Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008) and dampening the 'fight or flight' response associated with anxiety and stress (Hassed, 2011). Other research has indicated regular mindful practice helps develop empathic understanding in individuals and the ability to accurately identify their emotional state (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007).

Transactional Analysis (TA)

Transactional Analysis is an integrative psychotherapeutic approach aimed at personality change and growth. Its wide-ranging ideas propose theories of personality and psychopathology as well as theories of communication and interpersonal relationships (Stewart & Joines, 2012). TA was created by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Eric Berne (2016 [1961]) who developed the approach through the amalgamation of psychoanalytical, cognitive and behaviourist traditions.

The philosophical foundations of TA draw deeply on the humanistic, existential and phenomenological schools of thought (Lister-Ford, 2002). Eric Berne, the founder of TA was very influenced by the humanistic tradition and philosophy which he wove into his approach. Berne utilised the developmental ideas of Erikson (Elkind, 1970) to explain human growth through the life stages for example and went on to develop a humanistic appreciation of the human condition through his notion of 'OKness' (Harris, 2012). OKness is the TA theory that recognises that all people are fundamentally good and possess self-worth no matter what problems or issues they present to the therapist. According to this theory, the therapist's job is to treat their clients as real human beings striving to overcome the problems they have been confronted with in their lives. Berne also believed in the notion of existentialism and personal responsibility and taught TA as a way to help individuals face a range of existential dilemmas. The therapist's job in this case is to help facilitate the clients exploration of some of the existential questions in life and allow them to come to terms with those in their own way (Nuttall, 2006). Finally Berne believed in the notion that psychological change is possible for almost every person (with some limitations such as people with brain injury, for instance) who has access to the appropriate support from their therapist, and who possesses a degree of individual motivation to change within in an environment that supports their change efforts (Lister-Ford, 2002). In practice this would involve the therapist treating the client as an Adult and encouraging them, through the development of their therapeutic relationship to understand and take action on the issues that brought them into therapy.

From a psychological perspective, TA practitioners consider the mind as being divided into three 'compartments' or 'ego states' which each have a distinct phenomenological influence

on the individual. These compartmentalised structures are known in TA as the Parent, Adult and Child (Berne, 2016 [1961]). When the individual replays thoughts, feelings and behaviours which they have copied (introjected) from their early care givers they are said to be accessing their Parent ego state. At other times, when the individual feels increasingly stressed or excited, they may regress to a time when they were small Children and for a brief period, 'become' the Child they once were (the Child ego state). When individuals are engaged in tasks requiring concentration, level headedness, and seriousness or are managing themselves appropriately in relation to societal norms, they are said to be accessing their Adult ego state (Stewart & Joines, 2012). Interestingly the Adult ego state seems to be less developed in many people who seek help with mental health related problems including problems relating to chronic anger.

Transactional Analysis uses the ego state model to explain how our responses are influenced by people, relative to the ego state both parties adopt in their communication. This idea is the theory of transactions and proposes that if we address someone in a Parent ego state for instance, they will naturally adopt their Child ego state in response. If the communication is through the Child ego state, then the natural response to this communication would be through the Parent. TA aims to help individuals develop Adult to Adult communication as this is felt to be the most 'authentic' communication style (Berne, Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy, 1961).

There have been some studies within the TA literature linking TA and anger, explaining the phenomena through a weakened Adult ego state and/or a contaminated Parent or Child ego state (Hall, 2019; Lashani & Mazaheri, 2016; Hargaden & Sills, 2001). There have also been several attempts to connect TA's Adult ego state with a mindful disposition (Verney, 2009; Gold, 2010; Žvelc, Relational schemas theory and transactional analysis, 2010). Žvelc, et al. (2011), for instance developed an approach known as Mindfulness-Based Transactional Analysis (MBTA) that teaches TA principles and also encourages mindful Adult thinking. Individuals accessing the mindful Adult ego state are said to be more accepting, judgement free, non-evaluating and possessing the capacity to process experiences in the present moment (Žvelc, 2010).

One of the ways TA theory seeks to explain our problematic interpersonal relationships is through the notion of the Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968). Karmpan noted how many people seem to repeat similar types of behaviours which tend to bring them into conflict with others. Drama triangle theory seeks to analyse such conflict by exploring the roles people use in such situations. Typically, people adopt roles which represent the behaviour of either a victim, a rescuer or a persecutor. The drama triangle reaches its conclusion when roles dramatically change and force the individuals into acting out their old, well-worn conflictual reactions.

Finally, TA employs the theory of drivers and injunctions to explain why our most common behaviour patterns are so difficult to change (Goulding & Goulding, 1976). This theory proposes a developmental basis for our most rigid behaviours which the Child develops as they grow up. Drivers are imperatives of behaviour, such as being the perfect Child or pleasing other people, whilst injunctions are behaviours the Child is forbidden from enacting, such as experiencing emotions or thinking too deeply about things.

Action Learning (AL)

Action Learning is an approach to learning developed by Revans and is based on his observations of how highly regarded professionals solved complex problems through a group process of reflection and action on those reflections (Revans, 1981). AL uses the reflective

power of the group to help participants describe their real-world problems and through the enactment of group support, uses questioning to help group members develop their own strategy for solving them. In a typical AL 'set' a participant would describe a problem they are wrestling with whilst other set members ask questions aimed at clarifying the problem for the participant. Within an AL set giving advice and 'problem solving' for the participant are not allowed as the participant must come to their own conclusions and take their own action on the problem for it to have the most effectiveness.

AL has a wide and successful history of harnessing real change in areas such as management, leadership, education and academic research (Edmonstone, Lawless, & Pedler, 2019; Revans, 1981). AL can also trace its roots to emancipatory philosophy as it encourages the engagement with problems and subsequent actions based a cycle of reflection and learning. It was, Revans himself who considered AL to be a moral philosophy and his writings suggest a much broader humanistic ambition for AL beyond the original spheres of management, education and leadership (Pedler, 2008).

Project overview

The anger management programme this paper describes has come about as a result of the my development as both an academic and a therapist. In 2013 I initiated a 10-week psychoeducational anger management group programme which combined Transactional Analysis (Berne, 2016 [1961]) and mindfulness (Žvelc, Černetič, & Košak, 2011) within an Action Learning (AL) framework (Revans, 1981). I began to develop the programme after I became a Transactional Analysis Psychotherapeutic Counsellor in 2011. The programme itself was informed by my experiences both volunteering and working in psychiatric hospital settings, where I experienced the paucity of group approaches for the reduction of anger. In 2011 I also gained a PhD in Management, specifically within organisational learning, with my thesis exploring how groups solved problems using AL. This type of structured group reflection is an important element of the anger management programme, as it aids self-reflection and challenges individuals to take action on their problems (Shepherd, 2019). This particular paper explores how members of a 2017 anger management group reported their experiences through their weekly group 'check-in'. Of particular interest to me in terms of this study is how participants describe their experience of using TA and mindfulness within the AL framework.

Method

The 10-week anger management programme is accessible to members of the general public and attracts participants from a wide demographic including those living in the city, in rural areas being both employed and unemployed. Individuals are recruited onto the programme through a marketing leaflet and e-mails circulated to GP's and NHS practitioners in the local area, participants on this particular programme ranged from 26-58 years of age. The group lasts for two hours per week and typically has around seven participants on each programme.

A feature common to those participating in the group is that everyone seems to be at a time in their lives when they have made the decision to act on reducing their anger after a close partner or work colleague has made them aware of the damaging consequences of their angry behaviour. The group in this paper comprised of three males and one female. Two participants had been given a Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) diagnosis, one had been in counselling for a long-term addiction and the final participant reported no history of engagement with mental health services. In this particular study three participants completed the programme and one dropped out in week seven due to reported pressures of work.

On the programme, participants learn elements of Transactional Analysis theory and experiment with practical ways of reducing their triggers using mindfulness activities (Appendix 1). Each week participants are introduced to a mindfulness exercise which they try out as 'homework' for seven days until the group meets again. The ability to perform mindfulness homework practice in a regular uninterrupted way throughout the programme helps to create structure for the participant and forms the basis of all Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programmes (Santorelli, Meleo-Meyer, & Koerbel, 2017). At the beginning of each session, group members 'check-in' and reflect upon how their week has been in terms of their anger, the success of their homework and the state of their interpersonal relationships. Each group member spends around 10 minutes checking-in and receives support and encouragement from other members of the group.

In weeks four and 10 of the programme, participants are asked to complete an 'egogram' (which uses a 10-point Likert scale) to help assess the strength of their individual ego states (Williams & Williams, 1980). To do this, each participant listens to a description of each ego state and determines how much of their own personality matches each description (see Appendix 2 for full details of the ego states and their description). For each ego state described participants choose between number one, (when the ego state described does not represent their personality) to number 10 (where the ego state accurately reflects their personality). This tool is very useful as it helps provide a visual snapshot of the makeup of each person's personality at the beginning and at the end of the programme. The egogram is particularly useful as it indicates the strength of the Adult in relation to the Critical Parent and Rebellious Child, with a low Adult representing the participants difficulty in controlling their corresponding ego states and their overt anger (please refer to Appendix 3 and 4 to see the participants egograms from weeks four and 10).

Research design

The research was carried out with the approval and to the standards required of the York St John ethics committee and in adherence with Bond's (2004) *Ethical guidelines for researching counselling and psychotherapy.* At each session the facilitator recorded the participants check-in using an electronic voice recorder. The recordings were later transcribed in preparation for data analysis. The data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is a flexible, iterative qualitative approach to analysis which aims to explore the way in which participants make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is a useful analytical tool in this respect as it can help 'track' the changes participants describe over time from the more chronic levels of anger and aggression to the more acceptable experiences of living in the world free from anger.

The IPA interpretations employed a 'double hermeneutic' approach which attempts to make sense of the group members own sense making efforts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The process started at the data gathering stage where the researcher attempted to understand the participant's frame of reference at check-in by asking probing questions and seeking clarification, when necessary on some of the statement's participants made. At the analysis stage a reflective process sought to highlight metaphors within the language in order to help surface the presence of a participant's unconscious ideas.

Data analysis

IPA employs a set of common processes including 'moving from the descriptive to the interpretive' along with a 'commitment to an understanding of the participant's point of view' as an aid to sense making (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009, p. 79). In order to work within this

process a number of methodological steps were followed (Figure 1.). The transcripts were first read and re-read a number of times in order to engage more deeply with the participant's experience (each participant had 10 transcripts corresponding to their weekly check-in).

The initial noting stage was the most time-consuming element of data analysis as it took time for the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual ideas to emerge from each participant's account. After this phase was completed the data seemed more comprehensive and varied. In the next stage of the IPA process a link was made between the participants separate experiences in order to create a number of emergent themes. At the end of this process I identified 10 subordinate themes and three superordinate themes I coded as: 1. Sharing their struggle (Beginning weeks 1-3); 2. Reflecting and acting (Middle weeks 4-7) and 3. Consolidating and ending (Final weeks 8-10) (See table 1). In the following section the results of the IPA process are analysed using data from four participants; Peter, Andy, Stewart and Patrick.

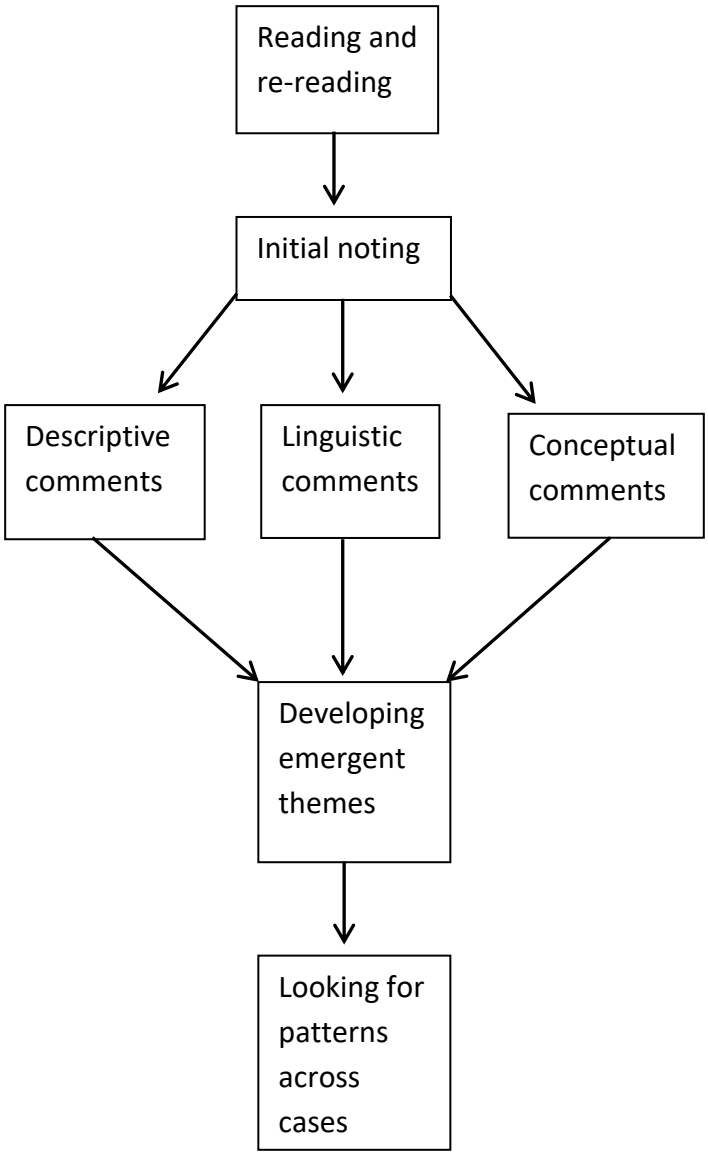

Figure 1: Steps in analysing the transcription data (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009)

Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
Sharing their struggle (Beginning weeks 1-3)	Disclosing angry behaviours to the group Discussions on mindfulness effectiveness
Reflecting and acting (Middle weeks 4-7)	Group reflects on a wider range of issues. Growing group empathy and positive feedback Deeper reflection on interpersonal relationships Discussions on mindfulness practice and structure Discussing TA theories and their application Two participants leave the group
Consolidating and ending (Final weeks 8-10)	Wide ranging conversations polarise into people building on success and people struggling with relationships Individuals become more separate as they bring their stories to a close

Table 1: Emergent themes

Results

Weeks 1-3: Sharing their struggle

Peter, a 26-year-old unemployed man joined the anger management programme in the hope of managing a self-destructive anger cycle, indicated by an egogram showing a low Adult and high, unbound Free Child (FC) (Appendix 3).

> *'I shout at mainly my mum and dad, 'cos they're the ones who are there… if no-one's there I might try and do stupid things which I don't really agree to… I've self-harmed one-time last year a couple of months ago as well I tried taking an overdose with my depression tablets, one time … I tried hanging myself'*

Peter's anger seems to be initially directed at his parents, but his anger quickly becomes internalised in uncontrollable ways through acts of attempted suicide and self-harm. Peter acknowledges the uncontrollable aspect of his anger as he reveals he does not 'really agree to' the actions he takes.

Andy is 54 and his egogram suggests a low Adult ego state combined with the classic anger traits of high Critical Parent (CP) and Rebellious Child (RC) (Appendix 3).

> *'some things just set you off and then all of a sudden it becomes tit-for-tat and it just builds up and up and up… shouting and screaming, banging things, and then you blow yourself out and at that point you look around you and just ..not physical devastation but mental devastation and everybody is being mentally scarred by it'*

Andy's experience of his own anger has connotations to the levels of aggression experienced in wartime. Before conflict the aggressor increases the tension and rhetoric by 'shouting and screaming' which suddenly transforms itself into violent, explosive acts. In keeping with this theme, when peace returns Andy describes witnessing the aftermath of his anger and surveying the landscape of devastation and the post traumatic mental health impact war brings. Andy

distances himself from has acts through the use of language where he employs both the second and third person, but no first person descriptive.

Stewart is 30, married with an 18-month-old Child. His egogram is interesting as he reports experiencing no FC ego state with typically low Adult. He joined the programme to resolve the anger and resentment he feels for his wife and which shows itself as an extremely corrosive CP (Appendix 3).

> *'I find myself just bickering, for no reason, it could be the fact that my wife once called the film that we were watching the wrong name, it's really silly… afterwards I'll end up just festering on it like "why did I do that?"'*

Stewart's anger seems to embody an air of superiority and an underlying bullying tone as he 'chips away' at the minor discrepancies in his wife's language. In this account there is a sense that the angry process happens to him and is not initiated by him with the statements 'I find myself…' and 'I end up' Afterwards Stewart turns his anger inward as he 'festers' on the pettiness of his criticality.

Participants would often reflect upon some of their familiar behaviour patterns at check-in. One of the patterns Peter returned to was how his anger lead him to become depressed and finally to self-harm.

> *'I just think all I do is self-harm, all I do is drink, all I do is shout. It just builds up … I was thinking about my past like the self-harming, the drinking, just everything that started getting me more and more p***** off, so actually I grabbed a knife and actually clenched my fist just so I could actually see my veins.'*

As Peter reveals his thoughts to the group he reflects upon, possibly for the first time how his criticism leads to more anger and the re-enactment of his self-harming cycle. There seems to be a certain sense of defiance in Peter's description of his clenched fist and raised veins, as if he is taunting the split-off part of his self to dare test his resolve and engage in the familiar self-harming ritual once again. On this occasion, and on many others throughout his time on the programme Peter refrained from self-harming and appropriately managed the anger he felt.

By week three Stewart reveals he is struggling to create structure for his practice. This suggests that his low Adult may not be able to implement and sustain a new and regular activity. To compound things, Stewarts absent FC ego state seems to prevent him from experimenting with the mindfulness process or injecting any fun into his endeavour, which would make the task more bearable.

> *'Yeah I'm gonna have to try harder but I think it was initially the first one that put me off … until my Child goes to bed I don't get the time to shut off and then generally I try and spend some time with the missus … but I think I'm just gonna need some time'*

Stewart's check-in has an air of defensiveness as he resolves to the group to 'try harder'. There seems to be several factors preventing Stewart from carrying out the mindful practice including being 'put off' by the mindfulness activity itself, his Child's bedtime routine, the management of his leisure time and the attention he needs to show his wife. Trying harder to create a structure within such a busy life seems an incredibly difficult task for Stewart to achieve. It

may be Stewart's phenomenological experience of his first mindfulness breathing practice, where he became dizzy and light headed could have affected his confidence in the technique.

Weeks 4-7: Reflecting and acting

Every participant who managed to create a daily structure for their mindfulness homework reported calmer, more reflective states of mind. They were less likely to be triggered by angry situations and were more engaged in learning, reflecting and taking action on their interpersonal problems. The following excerpt is typical of the experiences many individuals would report after a week of practice. Here Peter describes his experience of the 'Clouds in the sky' meditation (Appendix 1).

> *'I went back to the clouds in the sky actually, it's just amazing I mean that one I prefer, it's my favourite one if I'm honest cause I feel like that I can actually hear the river, the birds… I can feel the sun on my arm even though I have the curtain closed it feels, it's weird, you know, it's just, your minds amazing how it works like that'*

Peter seems amazed at the strength of his imagination and the way in which he can transport himself to a different place in his mind's eye. He can intuitively visualise a scene, hear sounds within the scene and feel the temperature difference as he undergoes a new kind of phenomenological experience. Peters visualisations transmit elements of hope in the realisation of the positive power of this type of mindfulness exercise.

In the early weeks of the programme participants learned the developmental roots of their behaviour through the metaphor of a rule book (Cornell, 1988). In this example Stewart begins to realise that he may trigger his own anger through the harshness of his particular internal rules. This suggests the CP ego state may be supporting a powerful 'Be Perfect' driver (Goulding & Goulding, 1976) which Stewart may have developed in his early Childhood.

> *'The book of rules, that really kind of hit home because that's why we bicker most. We never really argue and kind of thinking about it, it's me that's always started it. I'm sick of throwing it out at the wrong people, so at the moment the right person to focus on is me, so I've turned it around'*

Once participants began to experience the power of adopting TA into their lives, they started to share their realisations and how they had applied the theory in close relationships.

> *'…the Parent, Adult Child thing, you just find yourself analysing everybody, you just think "right I can categorise that so I know where it's going" and you feel a bit like a psychologist but when you do that you can read and understand the subliminals now. You think "right okay," you take a second before you answer and it's absolutely brilliant! I feel a lot calmer, to the point when I was coming here and somebody cut me up coming along one of the side junctions, normally I'd get really agitated but I just laughed'*

Andy seems to be astonished at the way he could analyse other people's actions and their unspoken motivations. His reflections suggest a positive shift of focus from himself and his anger to other people and their behaviour. As Andy re-models himself into a make-believe psychologist, he seems more able to cathect his Adult ego state and begin to separate his Parent/Child contaminations (Tudor, 2009).

The final participant of this study, Patrick is a 58-year-old man who joined the group to work on the angry feelings he has for his partner, after the cessation of his long-term addiction. As well as a traditionally high CP and RC, Patrick's egogram shows a low Nurturing Parent, a high Free Child and a medium strength Adult ego state, possibly illustrative of his years of addiction. Part of Patrick's journey away from anger is to try to overcome his 'Don't be Close' injunction which keeps him at a distance from loved his ones.

> *'I tried to be Adult and we had a bit of an argument, she said I was condescending and a bit, you know, not sincere. I analysed that afterwards, and thought "well maybe it's because I've not done it properly before in the past, maybe it came across a bit robotic?" That was my attempt at being sincere, but I could understand why it would become robotic because it was fairly stilted'*

Patrick's account has connotations of someone trying to play the part of an Adult husband but not getting it quite right. His assessment suggests a realisation that this behaviour may be habitual and counterproductive in his life. Through reflection, Patrick realises the limitations of his emotional range and the anger this injects into the relationship. Patrick twice refers to himself as 'robotic' and I wonder if his choice of words comes anywhere close to describing the existential emptiness he may deeply feel when trying to connect with his wife.

Stewart's later check-ins reflect the difficulty he has in curtailing his CP thoughts due to his strong 'Be Perfect' driver behaviour.

> *'I'm picking up on things that are pointless, you know it's the fact that she cuts a sandwich in triangles and I cut it in squares with the crusts off because he [their Child] doesn't like it but she hands it to him and he eats it anyway'*

Although Stewart realises the 'pointlessness' of his critical thoughts he seems unable to stop them. The continuing theme in Stewart's check-ins is the way the minutiae of his wife's actions become the focus of his criticism. This criticism seems to quickly 'rebound' back onto Stewart in the form of 'festering' ruminations. 'He doesn't like it but she hands it to him and he eats it anyway' seems to metaphorically underline the hopelessness of Stewarts recent anger management attempts.

Unfortunately, Stewart left the group in week seven, citing work pressures and problems with Childcare. Maybe Stewart was unable to bear the public exposure of his perceived inability to decontaminate his Critical Parent ego state which led to his departure. It must have been difficult, almost unbearable for Stewart to attend the group each week and witness other group members reporting positive changes in their behaviour, especially with such a strong Be Perfect driver and an unbridled Critical Parent.

In the following week Patrick uses the check-in to reflect upon his realisation of a drama triangle he has been enacting with his partner since he ended his addictive behaviour.

> *'I had a row with my wife, and I analysed it afterwards. It was this triangle and I'd been doing it over a couple of days, I'd been throwing the invitation out, I caused the [game]. I must have been playing the victim. It was me when I've reflected on it. My wife said "it's [as though I] need it to 'feed off'" and I'd never thought about it like that'*

This powerful check-in suggests Patrick is beginning to take his wife's perspective of his actions into account. Patrick's addiction excluded him from his family for long periods of time but served to satisfy his stronger 'Don't Feel' driver. When Patrick ceased fuelling his addiction, he unconsciously structured the free time he had by setting up drama triangles, employing victim like invitations and taking angry payoffs. The observations of Patrick's wife suggest his behaviour may be akin to that of some kind of energy sapping parasite. His wife instinctively recognises Patrick's need for drama and the negative emotional energy this will produce in the relationship.

Weeks 8-10: Consolidating and ending

In the final weeks of the programme each participant completed another egogram and reflected on the changes in reported ego state scores (Appendix 4). Peter reported a lowered RC and much higher Adult ego state which he felt was now 'in charge'. He still reported a high level of FC but it seems to be put to work in more constructive pursuits. Peter checks-in suggests he has begun to view himself and his anger differently. He is much more positive, has begun to develop his CV and has applied for a job.

By week 10 Andy shares with the group that he has started to use the empathic skills he learned on the programme. His egogram shows an increased Adult and much reduced CP and RC. He has developed a little more NP which he uses to help in relations with his wife as his Children no longer stand in the path of his angry behaviour.

At the end of the programme Patrick successfully lowered his CP and RC and strengthened his Adult. The real work, however, was to strengthen his Nurturing Parent and to increase his Adapted Child which will help allow his partner to take more of a central position in his life. Patrick accepts this is a long road and continues to build upon the work he has started by entering into addiction counselling.

Discussion and conclusion

Discussion

The question posed in this paper was 'what do participants reflect upon on a Transactional Analysis/Mindfulness based anger management programme?' and used the initial check-in process to explore this question. Initially participants reflected on and described their own anger in its various forms and received support from their peers within an Action Learning framework. As the weeks progressed participants experimented with a number of anger-reducing mindfulness exercises and were taught theories based on Transactional Analysis. The check-in itself provided valuable insight into how participants were progressing with their anger management efforts and provided a safe place for their honest reflections and their plans for future action.

The check-in element of the programme seemed to enable participants to create a sense of camaraderie in the group where they felt safe enough to describe their anger in quite graphic detail. I was often surprised as to how candid some participants were in their reflections and how much support other group members would provide once they realised everyone in the group were trying to overcome their own anger. Group members also used the reflective check-in to be honest about their efforts to carry out their homework practice and were keen to share both their successes and their failures.

Participants able to create a structured mindful practice tended to be able to reduce their triggers sufficiently enough to begin the reflection/action process. Mindfulness practice seemed to provide enough 'space' for participants to think about TA and begin the task of addressing their self-development issues. I believe this was an important aspect of the programme as this helped group members to explore the link between their behaviour and their interpersonal relationships, often highlighting how their own actions encouraged angry reactions. I have a strong feeling (based on six years of running the programme) that mindfulness itself is only part of the answer to the management of anger and that more research still needs to be carried out into how angry individuals can change their behaviour through the understanding and adoption of TA theory.

In the final few weeks of the programme participants built upon their achievements and began to improve their interpersonal relationships through the development of a strengthened Adult ego state and reduced CP and RC. Their continued mindfulness activities enabled the group to reflect on their behaviours, keep calm and continue to work on their relationship issues as the programme came to a close. Each person accurately identified an aspect of developmental work they needed to do in order to heal their relationships or pursue further life aims, gaining a more nuanced understanding of their angry behaviour in relation to themselves and those around them.

This study has a number of limitations which it is important to discuss. The most obvious being that I have several conflicts of interests in this research. As well as developing the anger management programme, I also acted as the group facilitator and developed the research project and finally wrote up the results. One of the reasons for this is the dearth of group TA practitioners who work in the very specialised area of anger management. TA is a comparatively little known and used approach, with psychologists and research preferring to use CBT as the method of choice. It is also unfortunate that I am one of the few researchers to be able to carry out such a project with my specialisms of Transactional Analysis and Action Learning within a university counselling clinic setting.

In order to address some of these criticisms, I would encourage researchers interested in TA/mindfulness and anger management to consider developing their own anger management programmes using this paper as their template. Alternatively, I would encourage future researchers to consider collaboration with experienced TA practitioners on future anger management research projects.

The next step in the development of this programme and one which I am currently exploring is to bring together past participants who have successfully completed the programme to help develop an augmented, more client informed anger programme. I am aware that the programme described in this study has had no developmental input from people who actually experience from chronic anger and my feeling is that the programme may be much more effective with such input. I am confident that in opening the development of the programme to past participants some of the original elements may change but other, more effective or useful content may be included. This approach is appealing to me as it begins the emancipatory process of recognising that the people with anger problems may also be the experts in solving these problems, with the role of researchers as facilitators in helping to co-create new programmes with their guidance. This way of researching and creating programmes is informed by a model known as the 'Recovery College' which has been running quite successfully within a number of mental health settings over the past few years (Drennan & Wooldridge, 2014; NHS Confederation, 2012).

Conclusion

This study found that as anger triggering experiences were reduced on the programme, participants were more able to reflect upon their behaviour, their attitudes to others and their interpersonal relationships in a more Adult way. There seems to be a power in the group setting that allows participants to reflect on their issues with honesty and integrity. The group programme encourages each member of the group to begin to take action on their behaviour in a positive way. Transactional Analysis theory seems to provide a useful framework for participants to both understand and contextualise their experience, which helps them appreciate how their behaviours impact on people close to them at home and in the workplace. When used in combination, Transactional Analysis, Action Learning and mindfulness seem to be an effective approach to the management of anger.

Practical implications

This paper provides practitioners with an insight into an alternative to anger management using a humanistic/developmental, as opposed to cognitive/behavioural approach to treatment. The approach may be especially useful for individuals who have embarked upon a CBT programme with little success. As the approach uses a reflection and action cycle, practitioners can clearly monitor how each individual is progressing on the programme and provide more time in the check-in for people struggling with transforming their reflections into action. In order for the approach to be introduced into a wider mental health related environment, practitioners would be required to learn a selective range of theory and skills including Transactional Analysis, Action Learning and mindfulness.

Notes on contributor

Conflict of interest
The author reports a conflict of interest as they were both principal researcher and the anger management group facilitator in this study.

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This research received no funding

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Appendix 1

Breathing and mindfulness exercises

Deep breathing #1	Introducing diaphragmatic breathing
Deep breathing #2	Blending diaphragmatic breathing with relaxation
Describing mindfulness	Holding an object and describing its attributes
Mindful body scan	Concentrating on individual parts of the body
Accept yourself	Allowing experiences to arise in the moment without judgement
Observing mindfulness	Looking at an image without judgement
Clouds in the sky	Creative visualisation
Participating mindfulness	Concentrating attention on one particular activity
Mindful walking	Walking slowly and deliberately

Taught elements of the anger management programme

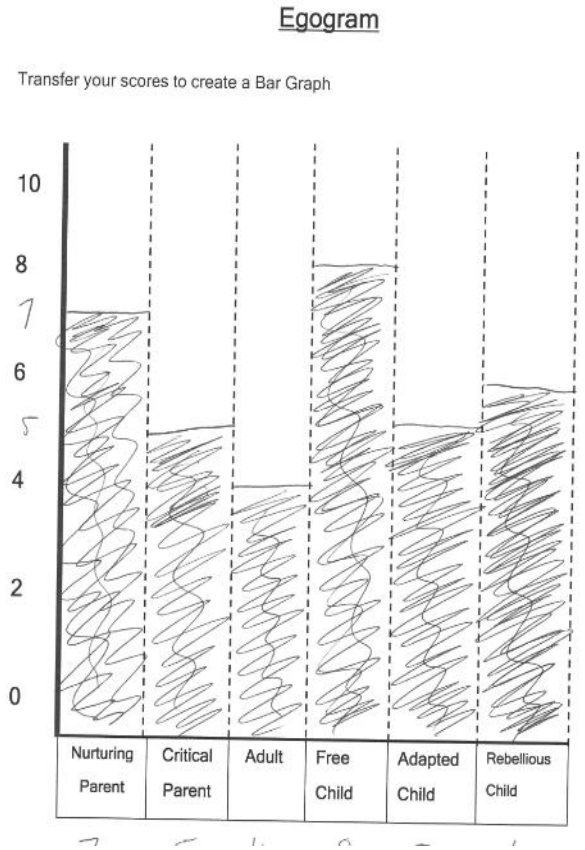
Theory	Details
Assertiveness	Linking to the Mindful Adult in Transactional Analysis (TA)
Drama Triangle	
Ego State theory	
Empathy and listening skills	Person Centred Approach (PCA)
False beliefs about anger	Developmental TA theory
Hot and cold anger	Hot anger triggers sympathetic nervous system
Life scripts	
Physiology of anger	
Red zones and trigger warnings	Mindful awareness of adrenaline release
Theory of transactions	
Yellow zones and refreshers	The parasympathetic nervous system
The unconscious mind	Unconscious defences – splitting, transference and projection

Appendix 2

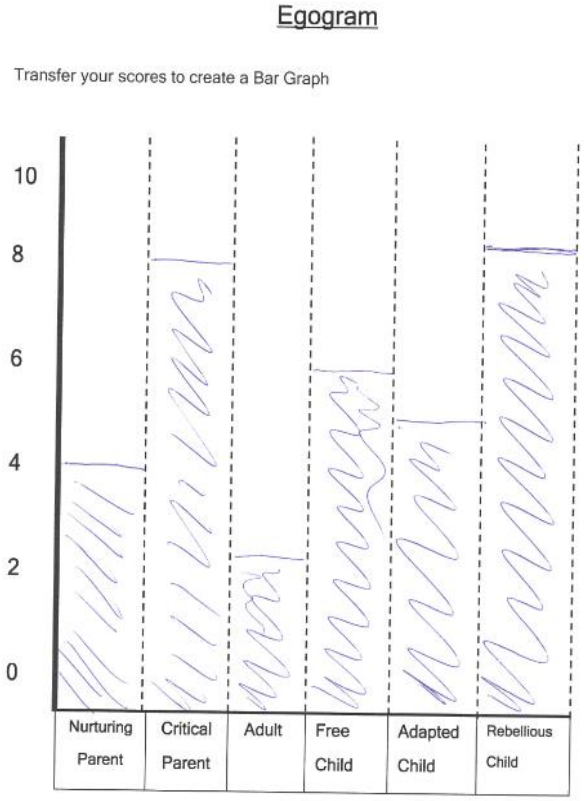
The six ego states and their descriptions

Nurturing Parent (NP)	The Nurturing Parent ego state is thoughtful, caring, protective and concerned about our wellbeing- just as our early caregiver would have been.
Critical parent (CP)	The Critical Parent ego state is criticizing, abrasive and judgemental and expects high standards from others or from themselves and is never satisfied with just how things are.
Adult (A)	The Adult ego state is balanced, calm and rational, similar to a computer in that it will only see and respond to facts-steering clear of opinions, emotional outbursts, fantasy thinking or anger.
Free Child (FC)	When we are in our Free Child ego state, we do things we love doing just for ourselves, not for anyone else.
Adapted Child (AC)	The Adapted Child will forego doing the things it wants to do as a Free Child in order to adapt to the other person and to their wishes.
Rebellious Child (RC)	The Rebellious Child will actively go against the other person's wishes to do what they want to do, often this will be accompanied by forms of angry behaviour.

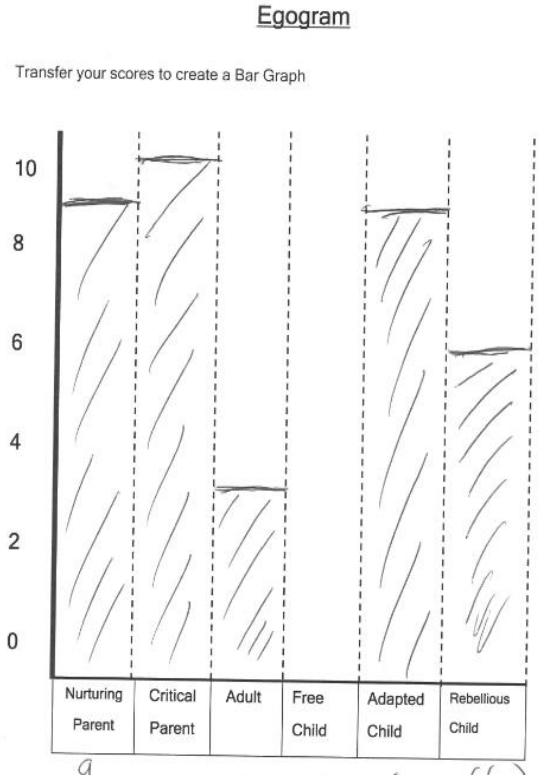
Appendix 3- Week 4 Egograms



Peter



Andy



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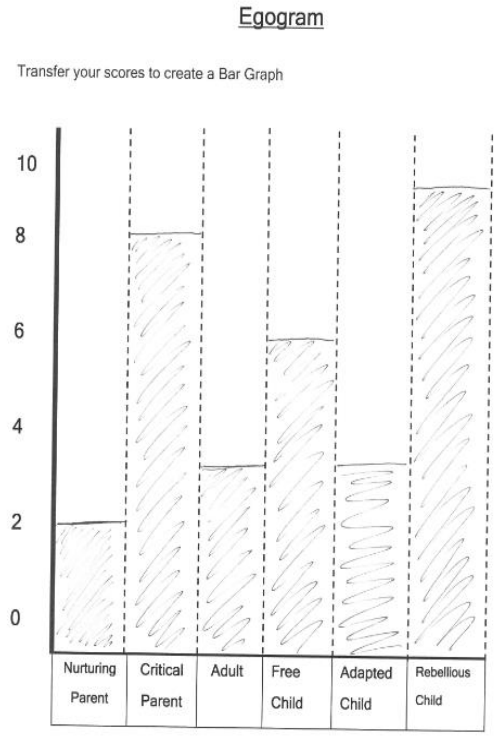
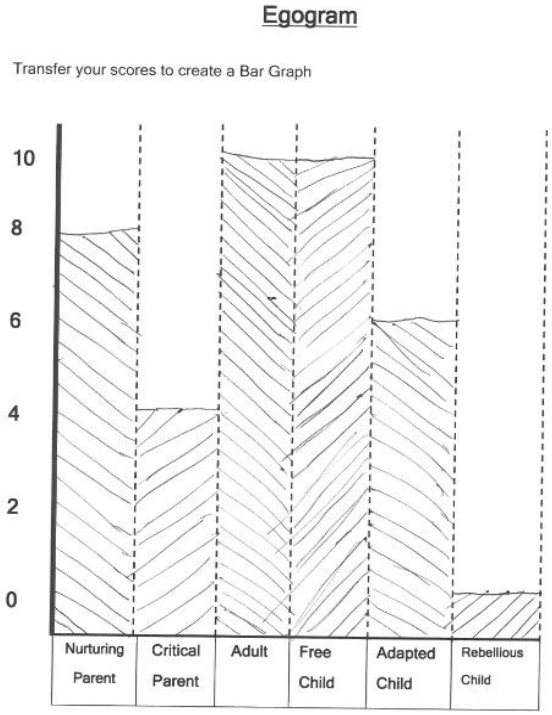


Patrick

Appendix 4- Week 10 Egograms



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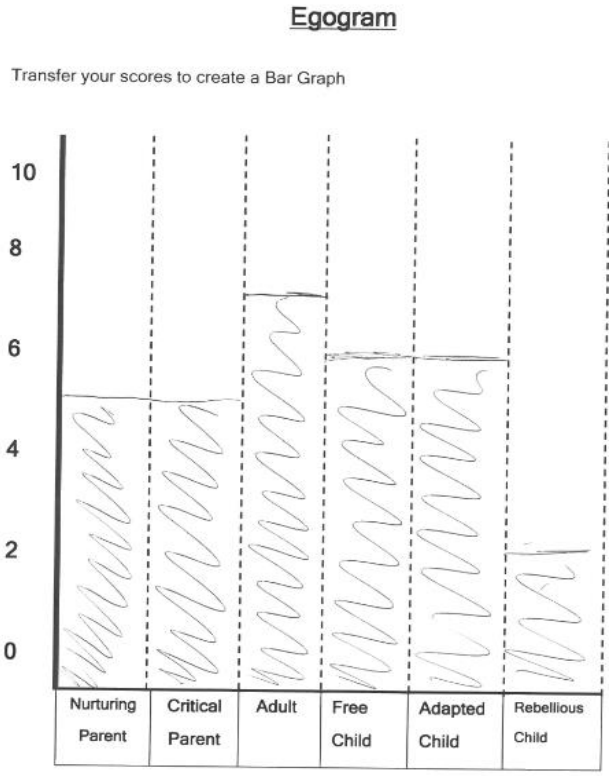

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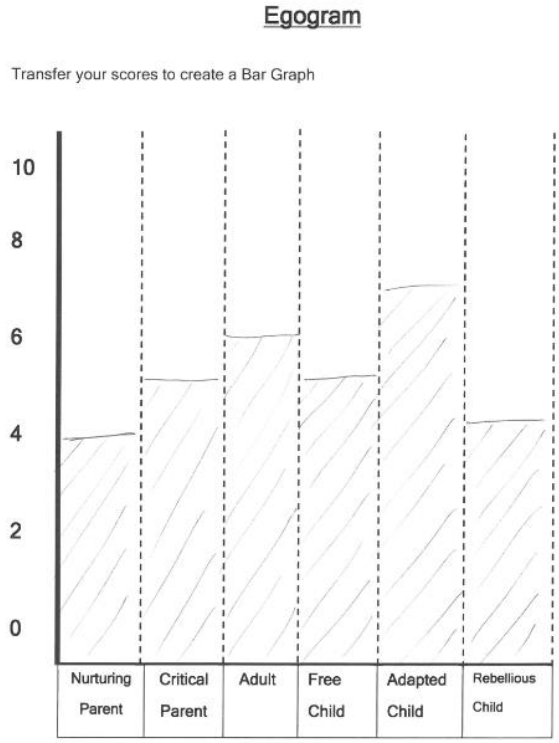

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