

Exploring the helping skills used by careers advisers: application of the Hill Counsellor Verbal Response Mode Category System

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Introduction

This article reports on a study that explores the use of the Hill Counsellor Verbal Response Mode Category System as a framework for investigating and categorising the helping skills used by career advisers. Audio-recordings of 13 career guidance interviews undertaken by six careers advisers were transcribed and then coded using the HCVRMCS. At the time that data were collected career advisers participating in the study worked for Careers Scotland and used Careers Scotland's 'Approach to Guidance' (Allen and Paine, 2006) in their interviews with clients.

This study forms part of my PhD research in which I am exploring the efficacy of a guidance model that was adopted and adapted by Careers Scotland. My research interests are informed by evidence from national and international research that demonstrates the immediate and intermediate outcomes of career guidance, but which highlights the need for further studies of the career guidance process (Dagley and Shannon, 2004; Heppner & Heppner, 2003; Hughes *et al.*, 2002; Magnusson and Lalande, 2005). In this respect there is much that we can learn from the extant counselling and psychotherapy research base (Heppner and Heppner, 2003) and I have drawn from this in the development of my research.

Research aims

The aim for the study reported here was to identify and categorise the helping skills being used by careers advisers who were working with the Careers Scotland Approach to Guidance (ATG) in their one-to-one interviews with clients. At the time that the data collection for my study was undertaken, I was working for Careers Scotland and my research was funded by the organisation. Since then the organisation has been re-positioned and is now part of Skills Development Scotland, a new national body and I now work as an independent consultant.

Careers Scotland adopted, and adapted, the strategic interviewing model developed by Nottingham Trent

University (NTU) (ICG, 1997; Allen and Malkin, 2006). The NTU model emphasises a rational and objective approach to career decision-making. Central to the NTU model is the notion of applying a model of guidance that helps careers advisers and their clients to explore the process by which clients arrive at their career decisions and the appropriateness of any existing career plan. Careers advisers using this model are then applying a matching paradigm in which they diagnose client needs in relation to the client's approach to career planning.

In my research I am interested in what the active ingredients of ATG interviews are, and as part of this focus, seek to understand the careers adviser inputs; and the helping skills that they utilise in the career guidance process. The research is explorative and this study is one part of a wider interpretative, discovery-oriented and qualitative inquiry methodology. This article reports on the application of the Hill Counsellor Verbal Response Mode Category System (Hill, 2009) in my research.

The Hill Counsellor Verbal Response Mode Category System (HCVRMCS) is a pan-theoretical measure that 'operationalises' the helping skills used by counsellors. An early version of the system first appeared in 1978 as the Hill Counsellor Verbal Response Category System (Hill, 1978). Since then there have been a number of revisions of the system published (Hill, 1986; Hill *et al.*, 1992). The latest iteration of the system is available on-line as a companion to (Hill, 2004) and was modified for the first edition of this text (Hill and O'Brien, 1999). The user guide and supporting resources for use of the HCVRMCS can be accessed on-line (Hill, 2009). In this revised version of the HCVRMCS there are 12 nominal and mutually exclusive verbal response modes: approval and reassurance, closed questions, open questions, restatement, reflection of feelings, challenge, interpretation, self-disclosure, immediacy, information, direct guidance and 'other'. In earlier versions two additional modes, minimal encourager and silence were included. As the HCVRMCS was being used in my study to support exploration and understanding of the guidance process, I applied all 14 response modes when coding the interviews. To my knowledge this is the first time that a study using the HCVRMCS to analyse career guidance interviews has been reported. Definitions of each category are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hill Counsellor Verbal Response Modes Category System definitions¹

<p>1. Approval and Reassurance: Provides emotional support, reassurance, encouragement, reinforcement. It might indicate that the helper empathises with or understands the client. It might suggest that what the client is feeling is normal or to be expected. It might imply sympathy or attempt to alleviate anxiety by minimising the client's problems. It might imply approval of the client's behaviour.</p>
<p>2. Closed Questions: Requests limited or specific information or data, usually a one- or two-word answer, a 'yes' or 'no', or a confirmation. Closed questions can be used to gain information, to ask a client to repeat, or to ask if the helper's intervention was accurate.</p>
<p>3. Open Questions: Asks the client to clarify or to explore thoughts or feelings. The helper does not ask for specific information and does not purposely limit the nature of the client's response to a 'yes' or 'no' or a one- or two-word response, even though the client may respond that way. Note that open questions can be phrased as directives as long as the intent is to facilitate clarification or exploration.</p>
<p>4. Restatement: A <i>simple</i> repeating or rephrasing of the content or meaning of the client's statement(s) that typically contains fewer but similar words and usually is more concrete and clear than the client's statement. The restatement may be phrased either tentatively or as a direct statement. The restatement may be a paraphrase of either immediately preceding material or material from earlier in the session or treatment.</p>
<p>5. Reflection of Feelings: A <i>repeating</i> or rephrasing of the client's statements, including an explicit identification of the client's feelings. The feelings may have been stated by the client (in either exactly the same words or in similar words) or the helper may infer the feelings from the client's non-verbal behaviour, the context, or the content of the client's message. The reflection may be phrased either tentatively or as a statement.</p>
<p>6. Challenge: Points out <i>discrepancies</i>, contradictions, defences, or irrational beliefs of which the client is unaware, unable to deal with, or unwilling to change. Challenges can be said with either a tentative or confrontational tone.</p>
<p>7. Interpretation: Goes <i>beyond</i> what the client has overtly stated or recognised and gives a new meaning, reason, or explanation for behaviours, thoughts, or feelings so the client can see problems in a new way. Makes connections between seemingly isolated statements or events; points out themes or patterns in the client's behaviour or feelings; explicates defences, resistances, or transferences; gives a new framework to behaviours, thoughts, feelings, or problems.</p>
<p>8. Self-Disclosure: <i>Reveals</i> something personal about the helper's non-immediate experiences or feelings. These statements typically start with an 'I'. However, not all helper statements that start with an 'I' are self-disclosures (e.g., 'I can understand that' or 'I don't know that' are not self-disclosures). Self-disclosures can be of history and credentials, feelings, personal experiences, or strategies.</p>
<p>9. Immediacy: Discloses helper's immediate feelings about self in relation to the client, about the client, or about the therapeutic relationship.</p>
<p>10. Information: Supplies information in the form of data, facts, opinions, resources, or answers to questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Information about the Process of Helping</i> b. <i>Facts, Data, or Opinions</i> c. <i>Feedback about the Client</i>
<p>11. Direct Guidance: Provides suggestions, directives, instructions, or advice about what the client should do to change (goes beyond directing the client to explore thoughts or feelings in session).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Process Advisement</i> b. <i>Directives</i>
<p>12. Other: Includes helper statements that are unrelated to the client's problems, such as small talk, salutations, and comments about the weather or events.</p>
<p>13. Minimal encourager: This consists of a short phrase that indicates simple agreement, acknowledgement, or understanding. It encourages but does not request the client to continue talking; it does not imply approval or disapproval. It may be a repetition of key word(s) and does not include responses to questions (see information).</p>
<p>14. Silence: A pause of 5 seconds is considered the counsellor's pause if it occurs between a client's statement and a counsellor's statement or within the client's statement (except after a simple acceptance of the counsellor's statement, e.g., "yes," pause).</p>

¹ Definitions for items 1-12 are taken from Hill (2009) – items 13-14 are included from an earlier version of the system.

The HCVRMCS is primarily a descriptive method that helps to illuminate what naturally transpires during the interview and categorises and describes the helping skills being used by practitioners. It does not provide a measure of how well the verbal response modes are applied or the effectiveness of their use throughout an interview. Early research using the system established that the application of specific response modes is associated with counsellors' theoretical orientation and training (Hill, 1979).

Method

Six experienced and qualified careers advisers volunteered to participate in my research. All the advisers, five female and one male, have had a role to play in supporting the development of the ATG and have an on-going role in training other staff in the use of the model. This non-random purposive (Cohen *et al*, 2000) sampling of careers advisers helps to reduce the instances of data being collected from interviews that follow an approach other than the ATG. The participation of these advisers ensures greater treatment integrity, since they have an in-depth knowledge and experience of using the approach.

The participating careers advisers all had training with staff from Nottingham Trent University on the use of the strategic interviewing model that underpins the ATG. Careers advisers work together as a community of practice to facilitate the on-going development and embedding of the approach. Detailed guidelines and a staff handbook provide an ATG reflective practice toolkit for all careers advisers. The use of the ATG Staff Handbooks and the professional community of practice, help to ensure that the intended career guidance model is the one that is actually delivered.

Due to the practicalities of work in the field a true random sampling of clients was not feasible. Accordingly, I selected a process of 'purposive' 'convenience' (Cohen *et al*, 2000) sampling for this study. Participating clients are then those who agreed to have their interviews recorded and as such form a 'convenient' sample. Careers advisers operate a needs-based model of delivery and only those clients who require in-depth guidance would receive an ATG interview. Agreement on diagnosis of need is reached jointly between client and career adviser. The aim was to collect data from a mixed sample of post-school clients, where possible taking account of age, gender and ethnicity characteristics, and as a result the sampling process is also described as 'purposive'.

Data for this part of my research consist of 13 audio-recorded ATG interviews, which varied in length between 28 and 61 minutes. Clients were five male and eight female, aged from 16 to 55 years. Although there are recognised advantages to video recording such interviews, the practicalities of working in the field meant that audio recording was a necessary compromise. Discussion with careers advisers volunteering to participate in my study made it clear that video recording would be overly intrusive

and would be likely to have an adverse impact on the course of the ATG interview process. A small digital recorder is much less intrusive for careers advisers and their clients. Also, it would have been difficult to ensure set up of video equipment at times that clients would agree to participate. Each of the 13 recorded interviews was transcribed and transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy before the coding of texts was undertaken.

Coding

Analysing transcripts using the HCVRMCS is a two-step process. The first step involves dividing the text into response units, which are for the most part grammatical units. Detailed guidelines for this process are provided in Hill (2009). In this study I chose to use codes (13) minimal encourager, and (14) silence, and as a result not all response units are identified following the rules laid down in Hill (2009). The beginning and end of each unit is indicated in a transcript by a slash (/). In step two each identified response unit is then assigned a single code.

Andrew Paine, a colleague from Careers Scotland, joined me in the coding process and we formed the judging team for this study. It is preferable to work with a minimum of three judges, but in the end I was pleased to have one volunteer and to be able to progress my study applying a consensual research paradigm. Prior to coding the interviews I supervised 15 hours training and practice in the use of the HCVRMCS framework using the support materials provided with the on-line manual (Hill, 2009) and excerpts from two transcripts. A kappa statistic can be calculated to determine the agreement levels between judges assigning codes and an acceptable kappa should be above 0.60. On the training scripts our kappa score was 0.73.

To reduce any influence we might have had on each other, Andrew and I coded the transcripts independently and apart. The interviews were coded by hand directly onto the transcripts. Typically we would complete a transcript and then meet together to review the codes assigned to each speech unit. Any discrepancies were identified, discussed, and argued to consensus. I then entered the final agreed codes into the NVivo 8 software package for further analysis.

Results

In all, 4361 codes have been assigned across the 13 interview transcripts. The number of times each HCVRMCS category appears, and the percentage of total occurrences, is shown in Figure 2. Grouping the responses from six careers advisers and 13 interviews inevitably obscures individual differences in the data. However, in all cases the code that appears with the most frequency is (10b) 'Information – facts, data, or opinions'. The frequency of (10b) responses as a percentage of each adviser's total verbal response units within an interview ranged from 23% to 55.3%. In 8 of the 13 interviews more than a third of the speech units were coded as (10b).

Figure 2: HCVRMCS Summary of Coding

Code	HCVRMCS Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Approval & reassurance	140	3.2%
2	Closed questions	470	10.8%
3	Open questions	356	8.2%
4	Restatement	288	6.6%
5	Reflection of feelings	7	0.2%
6	Challenge	42	1.0%
7	Interpretation	68	1.6%
8	Self-disclosure	59	1.4%
9	Immediacy	35	0.8%
10(a)	Information - process	327	7.5%
10(b)	Information - fact, data, opinion	1461	33.5%
10(c)	Information - feedback on client	334	7.7%
11(a)	Direct guidance – process advisement	168	3.9%
11(b)	Direct guidance - directives	328	7.5%
12	Other	69	1.6%
13	Minimal encourager	202	4.6%
14	Silence	7	0.2%
		<u>4361</u>	

A summary of careers advisers' helping skills that emerge for each interview is provided in Figure 3 (see below). The helping skills identified from the data tell a story of a

guidance process that is characterised by the use of 'information giving' and 'direct guidance' verbal response modes. So, whilst careers advisers do differ in their verbal behaviour across the 13 interviews, providing information clearly dominates as a helping skill. The picture emerging is of a directive guidance process that promotes a highly structured form of discourse.

Of course there is a degree of interpretation required when assigning codes. In this process judges have to make an interpretation of the intentions of the adviser when arriving at a decision on how to code each speech unit. Most of the discrepancies that emerged between judges in this study were around the coding of text that focused on the careers adviser 'teaching' or explaining the ATG decision-making method. After much discussion we agreed that for coding sections of the interviews that dealt with teaching the ATG method the code 'information – facts, data, or opinions' (10b) would be used; unless there was clear evidence of clients being invited to engage in an activity that supported their learning. If clients were being directed to undertake an activity during the interview then this would be coded (11a) – 'direct guidance process advisement'.

Figure 3: HCVRMCS Coding Frequency

HCVRMCS Codes	Careers Adviser ATG Interviews													TOTAL
	CA1 (1)	CA1 (2)	CA2 (1)	CA2 (2)	CA3 (1)	CA3 (2)	CA 4 (1)	CA5 (1)	CA5 (2)	CA5 (3)	CA6 (1)	CA6 (2)	CA6 (3)	
1 Approval & reassurance	8	10	17	10	13	11	18	11	4	14	7	9	8	140
2 Closed questions	79	43	38	22	28	40	29	23	25	42	30	46	25	470
3 Open questions	48	21	17	3	14	21	15	44	24	47	35	43	24	356
4 Restatement	36	15	22	7	28	31	32	33	13	20	14	23	14	288
5 Reflection of feelings	1	0	0	0	2	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
6 Challenge	1	2	2	2	0	6	2	4	2	6	4	10	1	42
7 Interpretation	8	5	1	0	6	7	11	12	0	4	6	5	3	68
8 Self-disclosure	3	3	4	2	4	4	1	4	5	7	11	5	6	59
9 Immediacy	0	0	4	0	4	2	7	1	1	3	3	9	1	35
10a Information - process	24	27	17	5	7	27	32	43	24	29	33	36	23	327
10b Information - fact, data, opinion	79	64	83	47	143	118	106	147	198	121	146	163	46	1461
10c Information - feedback on client	5	4	16	7	11	44	21	35	32	42	39	56	22	334
11a Direct guidance - process advisement	36	28	6	2	21	9	13	10	4	17	9	11	2	168
11b Direct guidance - directives	34	40	34	25	42	21	6	25	17	12	32	33	7	328
12 Other	2	10	18	10	1	0	3	2	3	4	1	10	5	69
13 Minimal encourager	26	43	21	24	19	13	16	9	5	3	3	7	13	202
14 Silence	0	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	7
														<u>4361</u>

Discussion

The underlying philosophy guiding the practice of careers advisers working with the Careers Scotland ATG model is a client-centred approach. It is a model in which the careers adviser focuses on the client's decision-making and career planning process, and evaluates this against an ideal rational approach to career decision-making. Clients are directed in interviews to consider an approach for making a well-informed and realistic decision. Interviews are directive in the sense that careers advisers invite clients to focus on a particular decision-making methodology. The focus of diagnosis and progress within an interview is on the career planning process and decision-making approach of clients.

So, what does the analysis of the data from this study tell us? What emerges from the data in this explorative study is a picture of the helping skills that careers advisers select, consciously or sub-consciously, in order to meet the strategic objectives of their ATG intervention with clients. It is recognised that at any given time the helping skills applied will vary depending on the needs of clients and the skills sets of careers advisers. The data suggests that in 'teaching' the preferred decision-making approach that is at the heart of the ATG, there is an emphasis on information giving. This was a feature of all the recorded interviews. This may not be provision of labour market information and information on options and opportunities that clients often expect to receive from their adviser. It is however a highly structured form of discourse in which information is being given to the client about a particular process of decision-making.

Discussion with careers advisers participating in the study reveals that after many years of practice they are not always conscious of the helping skills they draw on when working with their clients. It was surprising to some that more use had not been made of the more reflective and less structured verbal response modes. The data captured in this study has for some stimulated a deep reflection on practice that helps to bring to life the impact of theory on their work with clients. This is perhaps where the greatest value in the application of the HCVRMCS lies for career guidance, as a tool that supports meaningful structured reflection on professional practice.

This study indicates that the HCVRMCS is a valid and profitable tool to use to examine in detail the application of helping skills in a career guidance interview. As a tool to support structured reflection on practice, the HCVRMCS provides a methodology for uncovering a rich source of data that stimulates many questions about the guidance process. Caution should of course be applied to my interpretation of these results. This was a small, explorative study that focused on the application of an analytical framework to understanding the helping skills applied within the context of a distinct guidance model.

It would be interesting to compare the results of analysis using the HCVRMCS across different models of career guidance practice. I would be delighted to work with anyone interested in such a project.

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