

Researchers adopt play-by-play method to understand how counsellors can promote health

29 January 2019



UBC Okanagan assistant professor Heather Gainforth. Credit: UBC Okanagan

Using a page from a coach's playbook, a UBC researcher has come up with a method to analyze behaviour change counselling sessions and determine what makes them work.

UBC Okanagan Assistant Professor Heather Gainforth researches [behaviour change](#) with the School of Health and Exercise Sciences. She has recently published research explaining her approach to understanding the play-by-play of counselling sessions to help people make positive changes in their lives.

It's common for sports psychologists to use audio and [video recordings](#) of practices to analyze and closely examine the relationship between a coach and a player, she explains. They study every word, every move and every reaction to determine how the coach supports the athlete to have a positive or [negative experience](#) during training.

"I realized when I was working with sports psychologists that they are studying every single interaction of the coaches and the athletes," says Gainforth.

It's an idea she wanted to try in her own field of expertise.

"When a person goes for [behaviour](#) change counselling it either works or it doesn't," she says. "But we couldn't actually determine exactly why. What makes it work? Why did it fail? And I kept thinking, how can we figure out what makes these interventions [work](#)?"

While working with clients hoping to quit smoking, Gainforth tried the video play-by-play analysis. With permission, she used audio and video recordings to scrutinize minuscule details of sessions between a client and counsellor.

By examining behaviour change counselling second-by-second, she looked at the frequency, sequence and duration of each interaction between a client and a counsellor. Behaviour change happens, she explains, during a conversion between a client and a practitioner.

"I wanted to know what happens in that conversation," she adds. "I wanted a second-by-second analysis of these interactions to understand what works to help clients change their behaviour."

Gainforth developed a method to analyze these videotaped sessions verbatim.

She then used state-space grids to map each interaction in [real time](#) and monitor how the practitioner and the client interact together. Gainforth says the grids allow researchers to examine the dynamics between the client and the

practitioner. It's the first time in behavioural science, she adds, that researchers have been able to understand how these interactions actually make a difference.

"We have created a new method for people working in behavioural science," she says. "By coding the interactions second-by-second, we've created a method to visualize the counselling sessions over time. We can map everything the practitioner says and how the client reacts and then we examine how they interact with each other over time."

More information: Heather Louise Gainforth et al, Use of dynamic systems methods to characterize dyadic interactions in smoking cessation behavioural support sessions: A feasibility study, *British Journal of Health Psychology* (2018). DOI: [10.1111/bjhp.12347](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12347)

Provided by University of British Columbia

APA citation: Researchers adopt play-by-play method to understand how counsellors can promote health (2019, January 29) retrieved 20 June 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-01-play-by-play-method-counsellors-health.html>

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