

# Workplace counselling and social neuroscience?

**Dr Michael Walton** considers what may underpin a client's *presented* problems

One of the challenges of counselling is trying to work out what your client's core issues seem to be about. This challenge is intensified for the workplace counsellor because of the anxieties generated by workplace dynamics and matters such as rivalry, confusion, envy and performance anxiety. Trying to understand, appreciate and isolate the various interplays between a client's fundamental concerns becomes particularly challenging when they are entangled with the complexities of organisational life.

As readers will know only too well, initially paraded problems may not represent the core issues at the heart of a client's concerns and anxieties even though they may present as such to begin with. In workplace counselling, issues such as selection for promotion, burnout, performance anxiety, work addiction, performance appraisal, perceived inequalities in treatment, counterproductive behaviour by supervisors and colleagues, bullying, sexism, favouritism, and organisational power and politics are likely to be brought into the counselling room in some form or other. Yet matters such as these – each potent and meriting thoughtful, serious and considered attention – can disguise more profound, underlying dilemmas prompting clients to come and see their workplace counsellor (wpc).

Deeply embedded matters can be squirreled away – consciously or not – and conveniently hidden within the wide range of business-oriented *presented* issues which the wpc may initially be 'given' to work with. This can make it particularly difficult to unearth quickly enough, especially working within a tight, time-limited contract, the most helpful issues and dilemmas to work on in the time available with your client.

In such circumstances, accelerating the process of alighting on more deeply embedded issues sooner, whilst working with the presented issues as the vehicles for so doing, is likely to be beneficial for the client. This article suggests one approach, drawn from the field of social neuroscience, that may be of value for the wpc in helping to identify a client's more fundamental concerns lurking beneath their initially presented problems/issues.

The article also reminds readers of the utility of the work of Beck<sup>1</sup>, Riesman et al<sup>2</sup> and Seligman<sup>3</sup>, each of whom also provides straightforward diagnostic platforms in moving beyond presented problems and towards the more embedded concerns of the client.

## **Five 'domains of social experience' that could underpin a client's presented issues**

One approach which may be of assistance in brief time-limited counselling comes from the field of social neuroscience and could help the wpc to speedily identify the likely broad area(s) of a client's underlying concerns.

According to Rock<sup>4</sup>, 'Social neuroscience explores the biological foundations of the way humans relate to each other and to themselves and covers diverse topics ... Topics include: theory of mind, the self, mindfulness, emotional regulation, attitudes, stereotyping, empathy, social pain, status, fairness,

## **Initially paraded problems may not represent the core issues at the heart of a client's concerns and anxieties**

collaboration, connectedness, persuasion, morality, compassion, deception, trust and goal pursuit.' He suggests that two main themes emerge from such topics. Firstly, 'that much of our motivation driving social behaviour is governed by an overarching organising principle of minimising threat and maximising reward'<sup>5</sup>. He continues: 'Secondly, that several domains of social experience draw upon the same brain networks to maximise reward and minimise threat as the brain networks used for primary survival needs'<sup>6</sup>. Interesting!

This, however, may or may not be the case, and something that the interested reader may wish to follow up, but it is what comes from Rock's explorations that I think has particular value for

**Dr Michael Walton** is a chartered counselling and occupational psychologist. He runs People in Organisations Ltd and is an Honorary University Fellow in the Centre for Leadership Studies in the University of Exeter Business School and a member of the Associate Faculty at Ashridge Business School. michael.walton@btinternet.com



'primary reward' or 'primary threat' circuitry which in turn trigger cognitive and behavioural responses to social stimuli depending on whether they are perceived as a *reward* or tagged as a *threat*. Whilst the article is worth a read in its own right, the relevance for the wpc is that he has proposed a framework that can be helpful in teasing out some of the core concerns underpinning a client's presented issues.

## When pondering your client's underlying concerns, don't forget your SCARF!

Each of his five domains of social experience offer, in my view, a gateway into building constructive client engagements rather quicker than may normally be the case. They are – using the acronym SCARF – as follows:

**Status:** this is about a client's sense of their relative social importance; about their relative seniority and social standing; of being an important and significant 'player' – it touches concerns about maintaining or enhancing a person's status quo and position in the 'pecking order'.

**Certainty:** this reflects the extent to which a person can predict the future; the degree to which they feel they can rely on past practice to serve them in moving forward; it is about seeking to reduce relative uncertainty and about expectations being met.

**Autonomy:** this is about exerting personal influence and the ability to control the course of events; of being able to exercise choice and feeling that the person is in a position to take and drive decisions which matter to them.

**Relatedness:** this is about a person's level of psychological safety with others; of being 'in' or 'out', it's about collegiality and mutuality, of being part of the group, of trust and about inclusion rather than exclusion and potential isolation.

**Fairness:** introduces what can be seen as a moral dimension – it is about perceptions of fair exchanges with others; of being treated appropriately, respectfully and ethically; of moral transparency; of being treated fairly and honestly *vis a vis* others and how they are treated.

the wpc. It is that the brain's neurological and physiological reactions – behaviour, mood shifts, organic activity levels, blood pressure etc – are profoundly shaped by social interaction<sup>7</sup>. In other words we are wired-up, from day one, as profoundly sophisticated, socially alert entities and we will continually process what goes on around us to determine how we will then biologically and physiologically respond to the stimuli we have assessed (ie to perceived reward or perceived threat scenarios).

Rock's hypothesis is that there are five 'domains of social experience' which trigger the brain's

So the idea is that cues about the potential reward or the potential threat from social interactions are picked up 'just like that' which then impact on our biology, our physiology, our thinking processes and our overt behaviour. Responses which – at their heart – are all about personal survival and protection of our self in social settings. What is also interesting – and worth noting – is that, presumably to some extent at least, the cues which trigger action will vary depending on each person's experiences and expectations. So what may trigger client 'A' into positive or counterproductive defensive routines could be quite different to what would trigger similar reactions from client 'B'.

These five social domains could be used as an outline framework for the wpc to keep in mind when working with clients. For example, the client's presented issues could be compared against each of the SCARF 'domains' to see which – if any – may be reflected in the underlying concerns being presented by the client. In due course the wpc may then consider testing for such connections at an appropriate juncture within the therapeutic engagement.

If our brains are indeed genetically programmed to continually scan for threats then the SCARF notation could offer an uncomplicated way to clarify and identify the particular types of threats which seem to have triggered their client's anxieties even though the issues they may have initially presented could appear unrelated to the social domains of the SCARF formulation as shown in figure 1.



Figure 1. The five domains of social experience

So an issue initially presented as preferential treatment of a peer, or about a demanding boss could be issues around *fairness* and *autonomy*. If so, exploring those matters rather than, as an example, favouritism or unequal work allocation, might be of more benefit to the client. The framework provides another way through which the wpc can try to make sense of their client's issues – and the bases which may be generating angst for them in the first place. This could be very useful as an addition to the current range of outline diagnostic frameworks available.

### Resilience and belief in self

Arguably, engaging and coping with life's confusions, challenges, traumas and tensions has become, in some way, deeply problematic for those who come to see the wpc where, for whatever reasons, the client's resilience in 'overcoming life's obstacles' has become constrained or impaired<sup>8</sup>. However, it can be that it is 'how' a client has chosen to construe and respond to events – rather than solely the events alone – that will determine how well they will cope with them.

Three further approaches that come to mind when thinking about the underlying bases which might be generating the types of concerns presented by clients, are Beck's cognitive triad<sup>1</sup>, Seligman's theory of 'learned helplessness'<sup>3</sup> and the work of David Riesman<sup>2</sup> with his notion of 'traditional', 'inner' and 'outer' directedness.

Each of these touches on how a client sees, and has come to interpret, their self in relation to the social world around them and of which they are, inescapably, a part. They highlight how a person's 'thinking' patterns can come to constrain a person's capacity to cope with the social world and their place within it.

There is, though, no suggestion that the issues a client initially presents are not potent, relevant, deeply significant and to be engaged with. However, they may be a cover or a mask for more deeply embedded matters of concern to the client, which may require more time than brief time-limited therapy may provide.

Combining these notions with those of Rock's<sup>4</sup> SCARF framework thus offers the wpc bases through which to engage with clients at a more profound level than the immediate problem as presented, and quite quickly too.

### Meaning, identity, reputation, legacy

The matter of personal identity could be said to be at the heart of SCARF's five social domains, each of which could be viewed in part as a defence

against existential angst and ontological anxiety, 'that is, an insecurity about one's very being'<sup>9</sup>. Such enduring concerns can become intensified through the behaviour of work colleagues, potentially triggering a wide range of presented issues delivered to the wpc<sup>10,11</sup>.

Sustaining one's identity and securing and protecting one's reputation at work are matters of great concern and may well underpin seemingly unrelated – and arguably rather more bland and seemingly even mundane matters brought to the workplace counsellor. However, Hogan<sup>12</sup>, in *Personality and the fate of organizations* and Knights and Willmott<sup>13</sup>, with their discourse on power and identity in work organisations, highlight concerns of an enduring nature – such as identity and insecurity, power and politics at work, personality conflicts, trust, control, exploitation, integrity, legacy and the ethics of business life. Each of these can be explored through the various frameworks briefly noted in this short article.

**‘The challenge for the workplace counsellor remains that of engaging well enough with clients so that clients can engage with their own issues with more clarity, confidence and insight’**



## Endpiece

Whilst Rock's<sup>4</sup> framework was not – so far as I am aware – deliberately constructed for application within workplace counselling, I believe it has considerable value for those of us working in this field. It is definitely worth thinking about, especially when combined with the other sources identified above.

What could be said to bring clients to us is 'the disturbance of relatedness'<sup>14</sup>, and in the environment of the workplace such matters and concerns can readily become intensified and magnified. The challenge for the wpc remains that of engaging well enough with clients so that clients can engage with their own issues with more clarity, confidence and insight.

So, when pondering your client's underlying concerns, don't forget your SCARF! ■

## References

- 1 Beck A. Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders. London: Penguin; 1976.
- 2 Riesman D, Glazer N, Denney R. The lonely crowd. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 1961/2001.
- 3 Seligman M. Learned optimism: how to change your mind and your life. London: Penguin Books; 1991/1998.
- 4 Rock D. SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*. 2008; 1-9.
- 5 Gordon E. Integrative neuroscience: bringing together biological, psychological, and clinical models of the human brain. Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers; 2000.
- 6 Liebermann M, Eisenberger N. The pains and pleasures of social life. *NeuroLeadership Journal*. 2008; vol 1.
- 7 Lieberman M. Social cognitive neuroscience: a review of core processes. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2007; (58):259-289.
- 8 Jackson R, Watkin C. The resilience inventory: seven essential skills for overcoming life's obstacles and determining happiness. *Selection and Development Review*. 2004; 20(6):13-17.
- 9 Spinelli E. The interpreted world: an introduction to phenomenological psychology. London: Sage Publications; 1989.
- 10 Walton M. In consideration of a toxic workplace: a suitable place for treatment. In: Kinder A, Hughes R, Cooper CL. Employee wellbeing support: a workplace resource. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons; 2008.
- 11 Walton M. Leadership toxicity – an inevitable affliction of organisations? *Organisations & People*. 2007; 19-27.
- 12 Hogan R. Personality and the fate of organizations. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum; 2007.
- 13 Knights D, Willmott H. Management lives: power and identity in work organizations. London: Sage Publications; 1999.
- 14 Bettelheim B, Rosenfeld A. The art of the obvious: developing insight for psychotherapy and everyday life. London: Thomas and Hudson; 1993.