

# Conversation Analysis and Word Association

## Tools for Understanding Clients



Conversation analysis and word association are not only about the words we use, but how communication operates within social contexts, constructs meaning and organises relationships, and with them, power dynamics.

Conversation analysis is a broad term for the study of the ways in which language is used between people. It looks at conversations in their social context<sup>1</sup>.

Word association is a method of testing opinions and perceptions by determining which words are most closely associated with one another<sup>2</sup>.

### Why do we need to look at Conversation Analysis and Word Association ?

- Certain terminology (e.g. medical language) can be alienating and confusing. It may not engage the broader community.
- Words and concepts can have different meanings, emotions, attributes and connotations (positive or negative) for different people.
- Communication and terminology developed and used by service providers often reflects a power dynamic, where the provider is empowered because they understand and the client is disempowered because they do not understand.
- Word association can identify key themes and perspectives.
- Conversation analysis and word association can both be used to confirm preferred language for an individual, sub-group or group of people. This shows respect for clients' preferences and values.

### Engaging using Conversation Analysis and Word Association

A workshop style format can be useful for gathering information about words, concepts and language. The collaborative style means that clients and service providers can work together to identify themes and gaps in understanding and break down stigma.

These types of activities focus on people's experiences and perspectives. They are an excellent way to improve relationships between clients and organisations. Engaging at this level ensures that an organisation meets client information needs and understands the way clients express those needs.

It is important to remember that these activities are deeply personal. The associations of an individual with a word or theme may not necessarily represent the views of an entire group. Engaging with a range of clients ensures that all voices contribute to the design, delivery and evaluation of services.

### Word Association Activities

#### 1. Direct association

Begin with a key word or theme relating to the organisation, service or issue. Ask participants to write down all the words they can think of that relate to the key word or theme.

The words generated from this activity can then be grouped together based on sentiments (positive or negative) or grouped into themes such as actions or emotions.

Direct association is useful in identifying specific issues or gaps in knowledge and attitudes relating to a theme, service or organisation.

#### 2. Random word association

This approach may seem counter-intuitive but it highlights connections that may not otherwise be identified.

Begin with a random word that has no relation to the word, theme or issue at hand. Ask participants to write down all the words they can think of that relate to the random word.

Force connections between the words that have been created and the theme being discussed. This out of the box approach makes connections between word that may not be immediately obvious.

#### 3. Connecting words

This approach is a combination of direct association and random word association.

Start with two sections, one with a random word and one with the word being discussed. Ask participants to write down as many words as they can in each section.

Match together words from each section with common themes. Again, this method identifies connections that may not be immediately obvious. It can also show more than just an association between words but a pattern of thinking which can be used to build awareness around a theme.

1 - Shaw SE, Bailey J. Discourse analysis: what is it and why is it relevant to family practice?. *Fam Pract*. 2009;26(5):413-419. doi:10.1093/fampra/cmp038, 2 - DJS Research, 2019 <<https://www.djsresearch.co.uk/glossary/item/Word-Association>>



## Conversation Analysis Activities

Conversation analysis has a number of different approaches. It takes a more holistic approach that focuses not just on the words used but the associated relationships and social context of the words.

### 1. Desktop analysis

This activity involves analysing data that has already been generated such as e-mails, survey results and transcripts of conversations.

Once the data has been decided on and collected, it is up to the researcher to analyse and draw connections between themes and words.

The benefit to this approach is that the material is a direct extract from the client. They have not been given a set format or style of discussion, but are using their natural language and tone to convey information. The downside is that it is more difficult to draw connections and common themes. This type of analysis also relies heavily on the opinion of the researcher and not the client. However, it is still useful as a starting point or basis for common themes.

### 2. Collaborative analysis

This approach utilises a workshop or group style to gather, analyse and group data.

Participants are presented with different words, concepts and phrases associated with a topic or theme. Instead, they may be given a topic and asked to think of some phrases or concepts that they associate with the topic.

This style of analysis is useful for grouping preferred styles of language and terminology. It directly involves clients, and is probably more useful in terms of engagement and than desktop analysis.

## Tips for Conversation Analysis and Word Association

When conducting an analysis of already existing information, the following points need to be considered.

- *Informed consent.* Ensure you secure consent from clients to analyse their information. If you are making use of material that has already been collected or recorded, ensure the client has consented to the data being used for this purpose.

- *Privacy and confidentiality.* clients have the right to know who will have access to their information and how it will be shared.

## Additional Resources

Here are some additional resources available to help with conversation analysis and word association activities:

### [Brainstorming New Ideas: Word Association](#)

### [Random Word Brainstorming: A Simple, Powerful and Effective Ideation Technique](#)

### [Discourse analysis: what is it and why is it relevant to family practice?](#)