Students' Everyday Problems: A Systematic Qualitative Analysis

by Andrew Grayson, David Clarke and Hugh Miller

Abstract

The growing acceptance of qualitative research promises to minimise the perceived gap between counselling practitioner and counselling researcher, but brings with it the challenge of finding methods for dealing systematically, yet respectfully, with textual data. This article presents just such a method. Seventy-five students provided brief descriptions of the everyday problems of their university careers. A random sample of these first hand accounts was then sorted by 30 further students. Hierarchical cluster analysis and multidimensional scaling procedures were used to construct a categorical and dimensional framework within which the original first hand accounts are explored in more detail.

Introduction

This article is an empirically based exploration of the characteristics of everyday problems in a student population. It acts as the basis for further empirical work into students' help-seeking strategies.

Help-seeking among students has been extensively studied in the literature of counselling psychology. A variety of issues have been examined, such as students' attitudes to counselling (Halgin, Weaver, Edell and Spencer, 1987), the sorts of problems students present to counselling services (Heppner *et al*, 1994), the characteristics of students who use (and who do not use) counselling facilities (McLennan, 1991), the help-seeking behaviour and attitudes to counselling of students from minority groups (Nickerson, Helms and Terrell, 1994; Solberg, Ritsma, Davis, Tata and Jolly, 1994), the characteristics of preferred sources of help (Kaczmarek and Jankowicz, 1991), and the question of who students prefer to turn to in relation to the variety of problems they may experience (Hutchinson and Reagan, 1989).

Our research has focused on the last of these issues. In other words our aim has been to understand students' help-seeking across a variety of problem types. But in order to progress with this work we have found it necessary to take one step back from the direct study of help-seeking itself in order to examine the nature and characteristics of students' everyday problems.

In our work on help-seeking we have been struck by the important role that is played by people's own descriptions of their problems, particularly in relation to what, if anything, they do to deal with those problems. Indeed 'description' might not be an appropriate word here, for the way that people talk about a problem that they are experiencing is an intimate part of the identity of the problem itself; perhaps 'characterisation' or 'construction' or 'appraisal' (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) may be better terms.

However, it is only very rarely (see Brannen and Collard, 1982, for a notable exception) that one comes across people's first hand accounts of their problems in the literature on help-seeking preferences, because research in this area is dominated by checklists, inventories, and structured questionnaires. We have no argument in principle with these methods of investigation which yield useful information, particularly for policy makers and service providers. But if we are correct in our assertion that people's accounts of their problems really are an important part of those problems, and an important basis for the way they deal with those problems, then the over-reliance on these traditional methods of inquiry may not be providing a good empirical basis for the study of help-seeking, because it forestalls the development of a sufficiently theorised analysis of 'problems'.

Furthermore we wish to raise the issue of precisely who research studies are done for. Traditional 'quantitative' methods appeal to academic researchers because the data that accrue can be handled systematically with statistical techniques of ever increasing sophistication. But in areas of applied work, such as in counselling psychology, one consequence of the hegemony of these methods is a 'growing gap between the interests of clinicians and the output of researchers' (McLeod, 1994, p. 42). One reason for this sentiment is the distance which quantitative methods put between the sources of research data (the subjects) and the consumers of research data (the readers of published articles). Qualitative methods, in dealing directly with first hand accounts of subjects' experiences, promise to close this gap.

A key challenge for qualitative research in counselling psychology is finding strategies for dealing systematically, yet respectfully, with people's own accounts of their experiences. We offer this article as an illustration of just such a strategy. Here it has been used to explore the characteristics of students' everyday problems. But the strategy has a general applicability to any research programme which deals in the rich currency of talk.

The study is based on brief, first hand accounts of problems that students experience whilst at university. A randomly selected sample of these accounts was employed as a set of items in an 'unconstrained sorting task' (see Weller and Romney, 1988) which was undertaken by student volunteers. Hierarchical cluster analysis was used in conjunction with multidimensional scaling to provide a systematic representation of the data set. The resulting picture is one that has been generated virtually from start to finish by students themselves.

An important outcome of these methods is an opportunity to present a corpus of first hand accounts of students' problems to a wider audience. In this way the study is unashamedly descriptive. One of the most constructive things we can do to help people with problems, particularly if they do not seek help, is to increase the whole community's awareness of those problems.

Method

Subjects

Seventy-five students from a large university in the UK participated in a problem-elicitation (free-listing) task. The students were from six different degree courses (B.A. Communication Studies, B.A. Humanities, B.A. Modern

European Studies, B. Engineering, B.A. Accounting and Finance and B.A. Education), and included first, second, third and fourth year undergraduates. No formal sampling was undertaken. Resources were allocated instead to producing quality data by ensuring that small groups of volunteers were highly motivated to participate having been convinced of the importance and relevance of the research. The spread of students across all years of various undergraduate degree courses ensured that no constituency of students was systematically excluded from the study. The data were collected from small groups of students in order that the anonymity of the respondents could be guaranteed. No breakdown of demographic information about the subjects is provided because we wish to move away from statistical notions of 'representativeness', towards more substantive notions of 'meaning', by focusing readers' attention on the actual data that were generated. Furthermore we wish to make no claims about the relative prevalence of the problems that are examined below.

Procedure

Each participant was asked to list any problems which they had experienced during the course of their life as a student. They were encouraged to include problems from all stages of their university careers. Having listed and briefly described the problems in the left-hand column of a pre-prepared form, the participants were asked to describe anything they did in response to each situation in the right hand column of the page.

The resulting set of data comprised 365 'problems' and 365 related 'strategies'. A random selection of 100 of the listed problems was extracted, and the problems were printed verbatim on separate index cards which were numbered on the back. The listed 'strategies' form the basis for a follow-up study on help-seeking which is not reported in this paper.

Thirty students from a social work degree course undertook an unconstrained sorting task. Each sorter, working individually, arranged the 100 index cards into piles of similar problems. The similarity judgments were the sorters' own, and no restriction was placed on the number of piles to be created. Upon completion of the task each sorter described the categories that they had created. Weller and Romney (1988, p. 25) suggest that a high level of reliability is achieved in unconstrained sorting tasks when at least 30 informants are used.

Analysis of the sorted problems

A symmetrical 100 × 100 similarity matrix which cross-tabulated each problem with every other problem was constructed for each sorter. In each sorter's matrix a score of one was assigned to appropriate cells to indicate which problems co-occurred with which other problems in their personal category system. The matrices from the individual sorters were then added to give an overall similarity matrix; the higher the score in any given cell the more frequent the co-occurrence of those two problems in the sorters' own category schemes, and the greater the implied similarity between the two problems (see Table 1).

The similarity matrix was converted into a dissimilarity matrix by subtracting the value of each cell from 30. SPSS for Windows (Version 5.0; 1992) was used to perform hierarchical clustering and multidimensional scaling on the dissimilarity matrix.

A 13 cluster solution and a five-dimensional solution were selected from the output of the hierarchical cluster analysis and the multidimensional scaling analysis respectively. The solutions were selected on the basis of interpretability and in consultation with 'goodness-of-fit' measures (details of which are available from the first author).

The output of multidimensional scaling is a set of coordinates which fix every item in the analysis (in this

Table 1: Excerpt from Similarity Matrix

Problem no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	.	100
1	30	2	3	0	10	2	0	1	.	0
2	2	30	0	0	0	4	0	9	.	7
3	3	0	30	2	4	3	0	5	.	1
4	0	0	2	30	0	0	1	0	.	0
5	10	0	4	0	30	1	2	1	.	2
6	2	4	3	0	1	30	0	18	.	0
7	0	0	0	1	2	0	30	0	.	16
8	1	9	5	0	1	18	0	30	.	1
.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	30	.
100	0	7	1	0	2	0	16	1	.	30

An excerpt from the 100 × 100 similarity matrix. The cell at column 2 row 3 contains a value of zero, showing that no sorters placed problems 2 and 3 in the same category. On this basis we can assume that these two problems are quite different. In column 6 row 8 the value is 18. This means that 18 of the 30 sorters placed these problems together in a category. On this basis we can assume these problems are 'quite similar'. Very high similarity would be denoted by values approaching 30. Note that the matrix is symmetrical; column 8 row 6 also shows a value of 18.

Table 2: Hierarchical Clustering Solution for Unconstrained Sorting Task

Five Cluster Solution	Thirteen Cluster Solution	Exemplary Extracts
FINANCIAL	Financial (18)	*financial – making money last*
COURSE	Academic (12)	*trying to get all assignments in on time – and do well in them.*
	Relationships with Staff (9)	*hard to ask [lecturers] when stuck with work*
	Frustrations, Complaints and Disappointments (7)	*high expectations of course not always fulfilled*
	Placement Related Problems (4)	*worried about placement – no real help given*
DOMESTIC	Conflicts (5)	*clashes – especially with those [I] live with*
	Practical Accommodation Problems (11)	*difficulty with finding accommodation*
INTER-PERSONAL AND PERSONAL CRISIS	Leaving Home and New Found Independence (9)	*initial fear of being alone . . . having to make new friends*
	Personal and Social Crises (7)	*breakdown . . . caused by marriage problems*
	Illness and Injury (2)	*end of first term . . . ended up in hospital*
MANAGING RESOURCES AND FACILITIES	Univ. Resources (3)	*lack of facilities, entertainment*
	Time Management and Self Organisation (5)	*how to balance a social life with study*
	Travel (3)	*I'm commuting and used to find travel exhausting*

(The number of items in each cluster is shown in rounded brackets)

Table 3: Interpretations of the Five-Dimensional Scaling Solution

1 **Course** [Problems to do with the person's course]	–	**Not course** [Problems not to do with the person's course]
2 **Individual/private** [Individual, private and personal problems]	–	**Social/public** [Social, public and inter-personal problems]
3 **Home life** [To do with life away from the university city]	–	**University Life** [Problems to do with life in the university city]
4 **Expressive** [Expressive, more serious, one-off problems]	–	**Practical** [Practical, less serious, recurring problems]
5 **'Personal'** [Problems very much to do with the individual; internal locus]	–	**'Structural'** [Problems to do with wider institutional/societal structures; external locus]

case the 100 sorted problems) at a given point on each 'dimension'. The meaning of each dimension is interpreted by examining how the problems are ordered on it, paying special attention to those problems which fall at its extremes.

Results

Table 2 provides an overview of the complex data set. It lists the 13 main categories of problems produced by the cluster analysis (middle column), and gives extracts of the accounts from each category. A superordinate five cluster taxonomy is shown in the left hand column.

Table 3 shows our interpretations of the five bipolar dimensions from the multidimensional scaling analysis. These dimensions are the basis for our exploration of the first hand accounts.

The first dimension from the MDS analysis captures a key discriminating feature of student problems: whether or not they are related to the students' courses. When this dimension is considered in relation to each other dimension in turn, some potentially useful insights emerge, particularly where dimensions four and five are concerned.

Figure 1 shows the 100 problems plotted in a two-dimensional space defined by dimensions one (the x-axis) and four (the y-axis). Each symbol in this space denotes one problem, and category membership (according to the cluster analysis; see the middle column of Table 2) is denoted by the different types of symbol. Course-related problems (those on the far left of the figure) cluster either side of the mid-point of the 'expressive-practical' (see Harré, 1979) dimension. This suggests that course-related problems are unlikely to be as wholly expressive and serious as bereavements and breakdowns (labelled as 1 and 2, respectively, in Figure 1). They are equally unlikely to be as earthily practical as difficulties in travelling and in deciding what to do with one's spare time (labelled as 3 and 4, in Figure 1). Indeed academic courses provide the context for problems which have an intriguing mixture of practical and expressive features.

A careful examination of the problems classified as 'Academic' shows that those that align towards the expressive end of dimension four tend to focus on personal and intellectual insecurities:

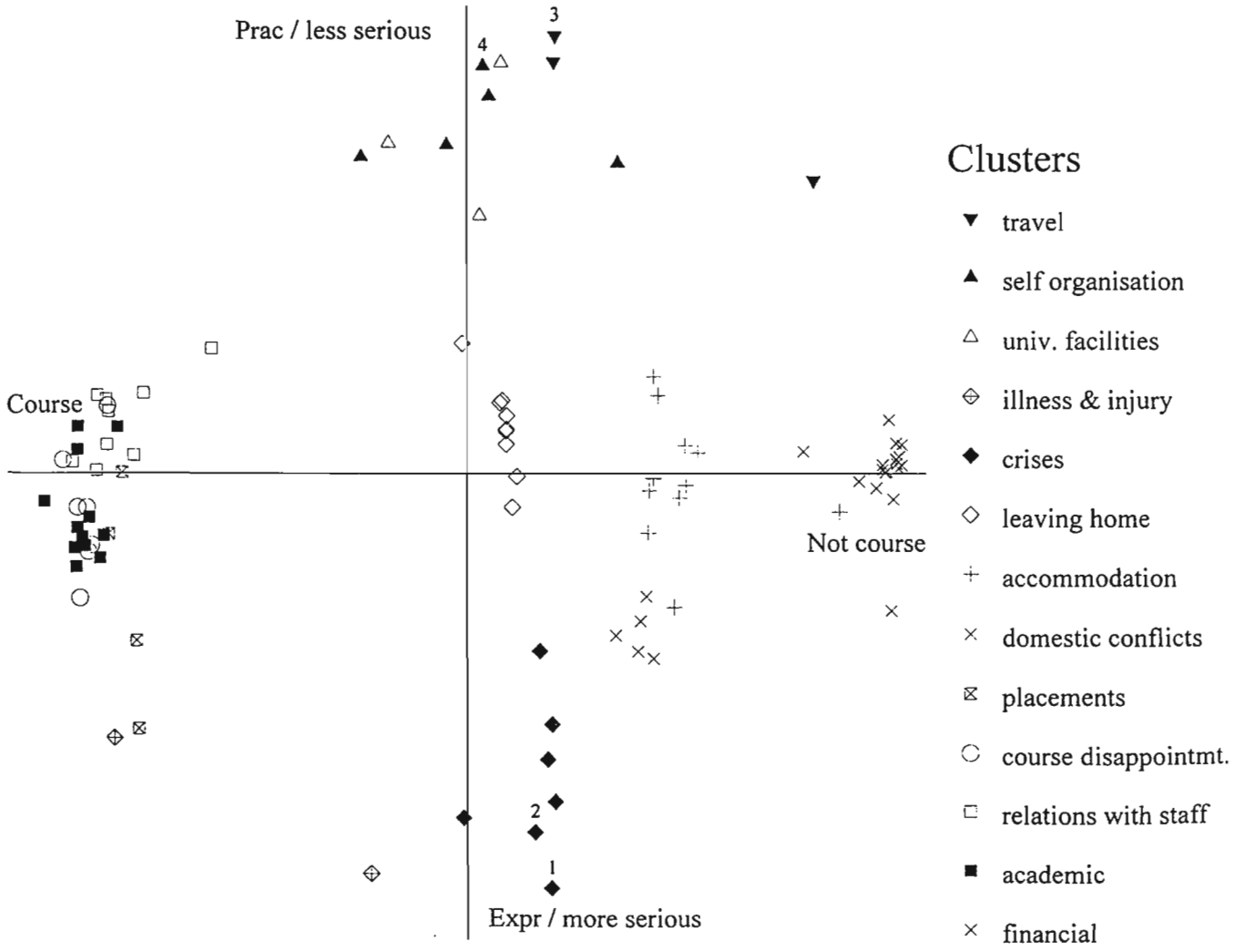

Figure 1. Scatter graph of student problems plotted in a two dimensional space defined by dimensions one and four (see Table 3).

Feeling inadequate . . . with work piling up and thinking others are much more competent and self assured than you.

and:

Will the grades for coursework/exams be as high as other students?

and:

Fear of failure. Feeling useless when it comes to handing in assignments . . .

Intellectual insecurities are a particularly interesting kind of problem. Many students who have participated in our research programme readily admit to these feelings. But the feelings are sustained partly because of a false belief that other people do *not* have the same feelings. Doubts and insecurities about one's own capabilities are grounded in the belief that everyone else is much more secure and confident in their everyday lives than oneself. Many of the students who took part in the sorting task of this study commented on how reassuring it was to read that other people experienced the same kinds of insecurities that they did. Perhaps the biggest single thing we can do to address this particular type of problem, then, is straightforward descriptive research which simply informs people of the existence of the problem.

Dimensions one (the x-axis) and five (the y-axis) form the basis for Figure 2. The fifth dimension ('personal-structural') is notable for the way that it spreads the course-related problems from the top to the bottom of the chart. Academic insecurities stretch towards the 'personal' pole of dimension five. More 'structural' are 'course disappointments' (which include complaints about and frustrations with courses), and difficult relationships with lecturers. Examples of these are:

High expectations of course not always fulfilled. Some aspects good but a little directionless at times. Worry about whether arts degree will prove valid in employment market (big worry given extent of overdraft). Also . . . running down facilities (library etc.) for arts courses – we get the impression that we are becoming 2nd class citizens . . .

and

Sexism of some of the male staff.

and

Proportion of students i.e. staff/student ratios and the lack of personal supervision is extremely evident. Being just another 'face in the crowd' to most lecturers often makes them unapproachable and many academic problems and queries are never solved.

The last is a challenging kind of problem for help-seeking research. How, and from where, does one get help for the problem of not being able to get help?

The fifth dimension incorporates the theme of perceived levels of control over different types of problem (with problems located at the structural end of the dimension being those which seem least controllable). Financial and domestic problems cluster closely around the mid-point of the dimension, perhaps implying that they are seen as

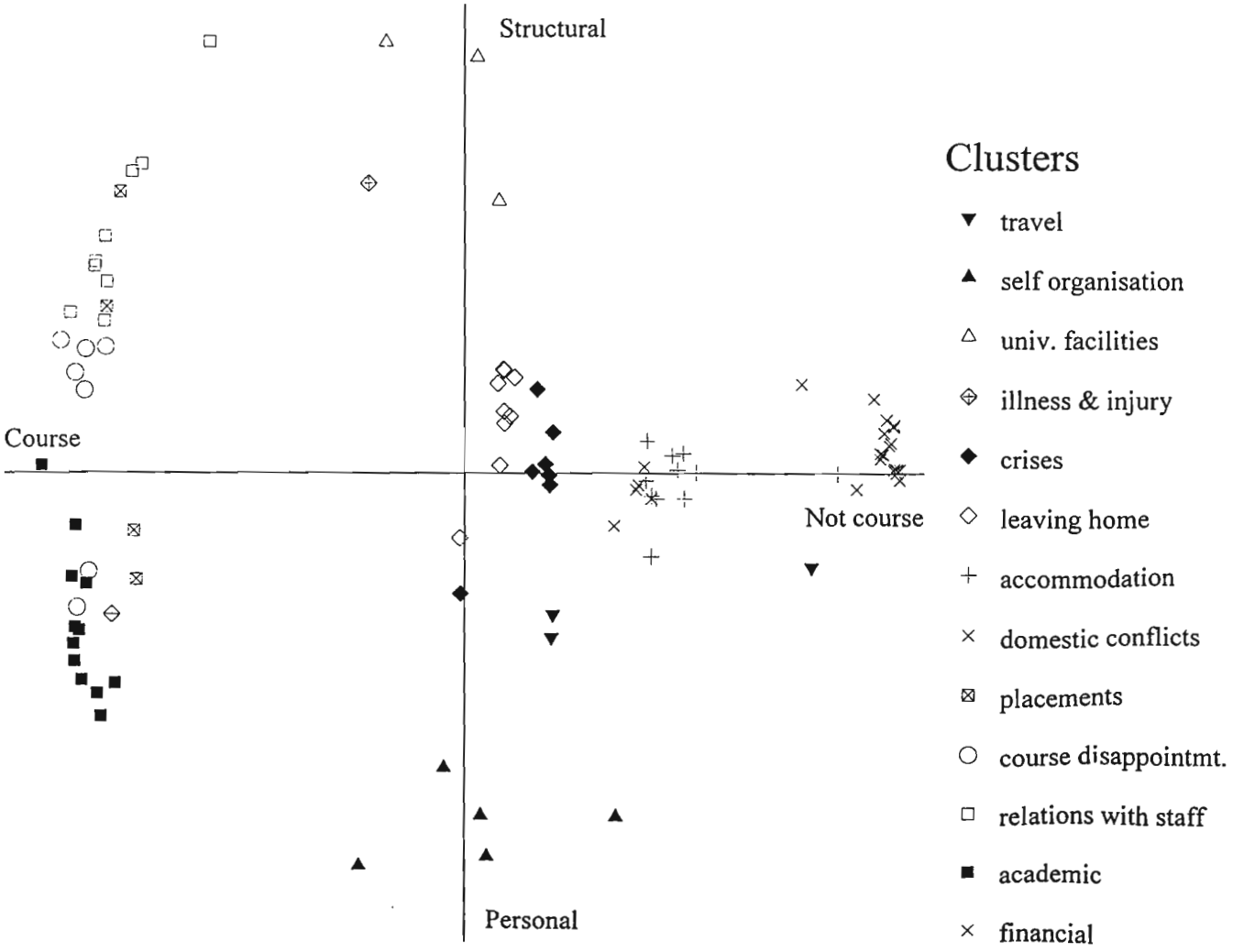

Figure 2. Scatter graph of student problems plotted in a two dimensional space defined by dimensions one and five (see Table 3).

problems which are *somewhat* under the control of the individual; if you do not get on with someone with whom you share (a very typical part of the student experience) you can move . . . if you can find somewhere to move to, find someone else to live with, and find enough money for another deposit.

A number of the listed problems describe the difficulties caused by leaving home, and by leaving the support networks that one has lived within for up to an entire lifetime:

> *Adjustment from home life to college life, i.e. having the independence yet being totally responsible for oneself – not having parents to run to if something goes wrong.*

Accounts such as these cluster together at one end of the third dimension, a dimension which highlights that one characteristic feature of life in higher education can be the living of *two* lives: one involving friends and family 'at home', the other involving new friends and colleagues 'at university'. The juggling of priorities and loyalties in this respect can itself be problematic:

> *Alienation from home i.e. having problems with home but being too far away to solve them. Trying not to lose touch with the people who you ultimately will return to.*

When these sorts of problems are plotted in a space defined by dimensions three and four, one account in particular is separated out from the cluster by virtue of being nearer than the others to the 'expressive/more serious' end of the fourth dimension:

> *I am an overseas student and I find myself DIFFICULT to get along with the english students. This maybe due to language barrier and different culture background. My english has deteriorated due to lack of communications between students . . . I am scared and my english is very bad and people don't understand me* [emphasis as in original].

It is particularly distressing to think that this anonymous exercise may have been the only time that the student was able to express such fears, because being unable to talk to people and to get help seems to have been so much part of the problem itself.

Figure 3 plots dimension four (x-axis) against dimension five (y-axis). Most of the problems cluster towards the origin of the chart. According to our interpretations this means that most of the problems in the data set are seen as neither very serious nor very trivial, and neither completely individual (and controllable) nor completely structural (and not controllable). It is tempting to suggest that the origin of the chart somehow represents the stuff of everyday, mundane experience; the point at which the feeling, experiencing individual meets the real, concrete world.

If this latest point tends to over-interpretation it should not detract from the observation that the 'personal-structural' dimension discriminates progressively less among problems the closer they are to the expressive pole of dimension four. The more expressive and serious a problem becomes, the more it is seen as lying at the very threshold of the personal and the structural. The isolated

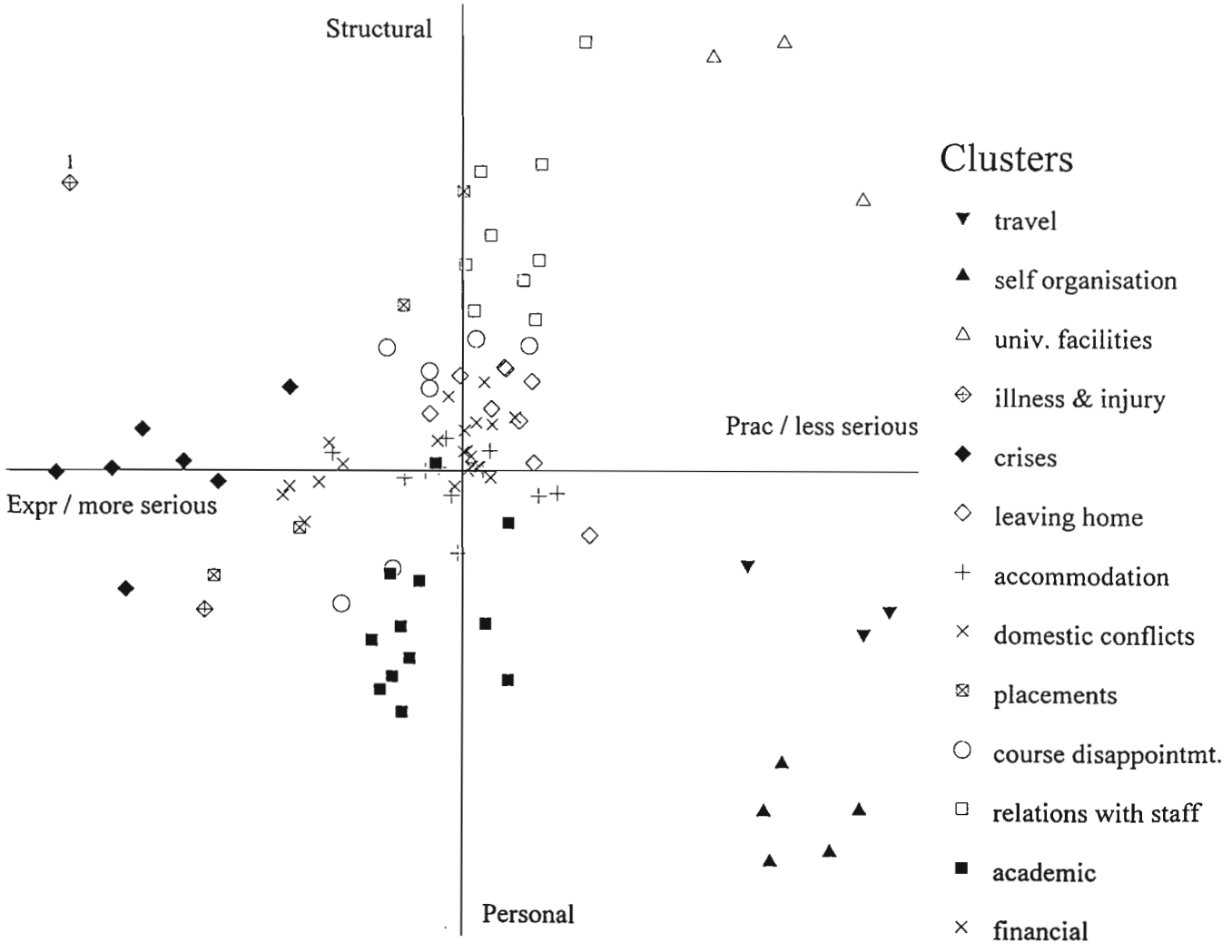

Figure 3. Scatter graph of student problems plotted in a two dimensional space defined by dimensions four and five (see Table 3).

positioning in this space of the one problem which mentions disability (labelled no. 1) is suggestive and challenging, bearing in mind that the picture has been constructed using a 'social consensus approach' (Forgas, 1982).

Discussion

This study has resulted in a picture of a domain of everyday problems in a given population which has been constructed virtually from start to finish by members of that population. The structure of that picture has been given a concrete form by the statistical analyses. We regard this 'concrete form' as an heuristic device (rather than a 'finding') which has been used to examine some core features of the specific accounts of everyday problems.

The analysis we present is not intended to be exhaustive. The picking apart of underlying dimensional and categorical features of first hand accounts of everyday problems is a major undertaking and is, at this stage, an exploratory process. Yet we believe there is scope for much useful work in this respect; work which can inform both research and practice in the field of counselling psychology, and which may help to narrow the gap between clinician and researcher. An increasingly detailed analysis of first hand accounts of everyday problems, for example, should lead to a sounder theoretical basis for help-seeking research, whilst fitting well with the growing trend of doing qualitative research which respects the insights and accounts of research subjects and clients.

In conducting the study in the way that we have done we have laid ourselves open to the criticism that there is no way of knowing how our findings might generalise to other groups in other settings. An additional objection might be that we have not established sufficiently robustly the 'dimensions' that we claim to see in our analyses. We acknowledge these objections, but believe that there needs to be more room in every research field for exploratory work. At some stage, of course, exploratory work must be converted into something more robust, but that stage should sometimes come later rather than sooner in the research process. The drive to pin down 'findings', and assess their general applicability right from the outset is part of a culture that can ultimately stifle research, and one that certainly pushes researchers down the traditional paths of quantification. The more space that is devoted to shoring up interpretations, the less space there is for including excerpts from the first hand accounts, with the attendant danger that voices like that of the overseas student (cited above) become hidden once again, this time in our raw unreported data.

If researchers in the field of counselling are to capitalise on the growing acceptance of qualitative research methods, then methods are needed which allow for the systematic handling and analysis of large quantities of text. But these methods must respect the text, and not obscure it from the eventual readership of research reports. In person centred (or client centred) research the real knowledge and understanding comes directly from 'people's life stories, freely offered and infinitely precious' (Thomas, 1994, p. 45). We believe that the methods that have been used in this study may be particularly well suited to these ends.

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