The meaning of counselling from the client’s perspective: a qualitative study of client experiences of therapy in two voluntary sector agencies

Jacqui Lindsay, John McLeod, Anne Goldie and members of the Crossreach/Tom Allan Research Group

BACP Research Conference, London, May 2014
jacqui.lindsay@crossreach.org.uk
Members of the Crossreach/Tom Allan Research Group

- Jenny Charters
- Anne Goldie
- Alwyn Ferguson
- Stephan Helfer
- Emma Keir
- Margaret Kent
- Jacqui Lindsay
- Judith McCluskey
- Sheila McDonald
- John McLeod
- Joyce Mitchell
- Anne-Marie McNeil
- Lesley Reid
- Janis Sinclair
Crossreach Counselling (Lothians)
Tom Allan Centre (Glasgow)

- Established 1986
- Over 1100 new clients each year
- Average 8-10 sessions
- 60% women clients; 40% men
- Clients from all backgrounds
- Over 130 counsellors
  (70% trained, 30% in training)
- Initial training of counsellors
Aims of the study

• To explore how clients understand and evaluate the outcomes of counselling

• To contribute to the development of ‘grassroots’ research, carried out by front-line practitioners
Background in Previous Research

• The client/service user’s perspective

• Capture the client’s voice/experience

• What clients find helpful/hindering in counselling.

• Client experiences of the outcomes of counselling
  (key references in handout)
Distinctive aspects of this study

• Use of time-line to track client trajectory

• Interviewer notes own emotional response to interviewee

• Use of change Interview (Elliott)

• Visual representation of findings

• Multiple researchers
METHOD

• Clients asked if they could be contacted after end of therapy
• 6-12 months post-therapy; completed ethical consent form
• Interviews lasted for 1-2 hours.
• Coded for themes (grounded theory approach)
• Themes organised into a narrative summary for each case
• Each coding and summary audited by at least one other member of the group
• Narrative summaries compared by lead researcher – presented preliminary analysis to group
• Further refinement of analysis through dialogue in group
EXAMPLE OF AN INTERVIEW TIME-LINE
SAMPLE

• 20 clients

• Age: 21-70

• 15 women, 5 men

• Number of sessions: 5-72

• Each case given a title – ‘analyst’, ‘young mother’, ‘artist’, ‘nanny’
SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

• All participants satisfied and appreciative
• Good outcome – 16 clients
• Mixed outcome – 4 clients

• Artist: “Often in my prayers you know if she came into my mind, I would say 'thank you for the help and I hope you're ok’”

• Young Business Woman: “I suppose I think it's quite nice really to think about the progress that I have made, compared when I came in. I did find the whole process very helpful and supportive and very grateful for it.”
EXAMPLES OF CLIENT TRAJECTORIES THROUGH THERAPY
Transformational Change of Life-
Long Problem

Sexually Abused as Child

“Ruined my Life”

Spiritualist Church

Long –Term Severe Depression

Talk to Sister

Counselling

Wary at First

“Counsellor helped me to Talk”

Caring Two Chair Work

“Opened my mind up”

Legal Action

GP

Unable to Have Intimate Relationships

Outcomes

“Made me harder”
“On the alert for abuse”
“The fear has left me”
“More Contented”
“Weaned myself off medication”

Moving on in Life

Voluntary Work with Children in India

challenge the abuser
The Analyst

Life Crisis
Death of Husband Has Been Very Close

5 Months Later
“Desperation Point”
“Numb” – “In a Bubble” Lack of Sleep Depression/Anxiety/Panic Unable to Fulfill Work Tasks

Friend Recommended Counselling

Reluctant to Try It 70 Sessions “Eureka Moments”
Someone to listen

Outcomes:
Being Able to Ask for Help
Normalising
Positive Attitude
Coping Strategies
Functioning at Work

Continuing to Move Forward, Although It Is Hard

Facing Darkness Within
Anti-Depressants Further Losses
The Support Worker

Long-Term Post-Viral Fatigue Syndrome

Upsetting, Disrupted Life

Previous Experience of Therapy

Positive about Entering Counselling

20 Sessions

Counsellor Was Calm and Accepting

Made Sense of Difficult Childhood Experiences (Disability)

Improved Relationship with Sister

More Caring of Self

No “Cure” for Post-Viral Fatigue Although some Improvement

Exploring Further Avenues
SELECTED CROSS-CASE THEMES
Theme 1: The counselling agency as a stable and known presence within a local network of care

• Most clients contacted the agency following recommendations from trusted others.

• Clients described the counselling centre as a safe place to be – felt taken care of – trusted their counsellor.
THEME 2: why/how counselling helped

High degree of consistency across participants
- Safety and confidentiality
- Someone who genuinely cares about me
- Being helped to talk and express my feelings
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Most clients valued creative interventions
- Having enough time to go at own pace
THEME 3: actively seeking help and support from a variety of sources

- All clients reported pre-counselling and concurrent use of other helping resources.

- In general, these resources were not suggested or initiated by the counsellor.
THEME 4: Elements of outcome

• Bursting the Bubble

• The Jigsaw Effect

• The L’Oreal Factor (because your worth it!)

• The Pinocchio Phenomenon

• May the Force be with you
Elements of outcome, cont.

- Shift in emotional landscape
- Re-organising life/making decisions
- Using new coping skills and strategies
- Finding a voice
CONCLUSIONS

Importance of Context:

• The meaning or perceived value of an episode of counselling depends on where it fits into the person’s life as a whole

• The reputation of the counselling agency facilitates trust

• The helpfulness of counselling depends in part on the availability of other sources of learning and support within the community
CONCLUSIONS

The distinctiveness of “counselling” as a form of help:

• A safe space
• Flexible and responsive
• Caring
• Dialogue
• Creative techniques and strategies
• Affirmation of “person-centred” values
• Non-medicalised
POSSIBLE AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

• look at what happens in poor outcome cases
• effect of providing clients with more information at the start of therapy
• the therapeutic effect of taking part in a follow-up interview
• the impact on counsellor practice and development, of taking part in research
• the interviewer’s response to the client, as a source of data