What do students think about counselling?

Christine Ramsey-Wade provides a brief summary of her dissertation research making an in-depth analysis of student experiences of their counselling at university.

My dissertation research attempted to discover in depth and detail how a few students who had undergone counselling at their university had experienced their therapy, particularly in terms of any effects on their studies. By analysing their experiences, a picture of the possible processes and outcomes of therapy, as well as the factors that may drive students to seek support and their changing experiences of therapy over time, emerged for me. This picture corresponds to other trends in the literature indicating that clients experience those factors common to most theoretical approaches to therapy as most helpful. These findings cannot be generalised to other situations, however, and must be considered tentatively. Nevertheless, they may give therapists and managers some ideas regarding how university students may be supported, while indicating to students the possible benefits of undergoing therapy while completing a degree.

**Students’ views of counselling or therapy - the research context**

There is a need for more research into the area of student mental health.

Olohan’s (2004:194) recent survey contends that student mental health is an area that has been overlooked by psychological research, despite the fact that these support services live alongside university psychology departments. The literature on the effects of therapy on students is also developing. There has been some important and high quality work done demonstrating the effectiveness of counselling in terms of improving student retention (Elton Wilson, 1994; Rickinson, 1997; Rickinson, 1998; Rana et al, 1999; Universities UK, 2002). However, it is noticeable that most studies of student mental health have been carried out at a single university only, and have been done from the service’s or the institution’s perspective. The effects of therapy on students have largely been investigated or reported in terms of student retention, as opposed to what students find most or least helpful in their therapeutic experiences, either generally or in terms of their academic performance. This could be seen as a sign of the underlying agenda or need of most student services to provide evidence of their effectiveness in ways that relate to the financial pressures experienced by the larger institution (i.e. dropout rates or rising levels of mental illness amongst students) in order to justify ongoing funding.

Few studies have examined or explored those services in terms of the experiences of the students themselves (McLennan, 1991; Surtees et al, 1998); and even fewer have allowed the students to use their own words when doing so (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2002). This trend is being recognised, however; the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2003) actually recommends further...
research into student clients’ perceptions and preferences regarding the responses of support services, in the hope that this improved understanding could be used to increase the number of students who use these services. The parents of university students who have committed suicide have lodged similar pleas (Harvey, 2002). This is the gap in the literature to which this research study (Ramsey-Wade, unpublished dissertation) attempted to respond.

**Participants supplied several factors that they felt blocked or interfered with their therapeutic change**

It had been developed for use in health psychology originally, but has increasingly been used to research therapeutic issues, as its methodological assumptions are a good fit for this kind of research (see Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 1997; Golsworthy and Coyle, 2001). In this method, transcripts of interviews were read through several times and annotated for associations, interpretations or summaries, after which they were read through several times more to draw out what seemed to me to be key themes or concepts. These rough lists of emerging themes were then sent to the participants for their verification; only three responded, but all who did were very positive. Themes were then clustered and collated into a master table of themes that was checked against the original transcripts to ensure it represented the material as accurately as possible.

**The changing experience of therapy**

The students in this study described many facets of their pre- and early therapy experiences. For example, several different driving factors for seeking counselling were mentioned, such as the intensity of students’ difficulties or distress, events in their personal lives, the stress associated with transitional periods in the life-span, the stress of university life itself, or a desire for personal or self development. Interestingly, some students experienced a lack of a waiting period before they were seen as positive or supportive, whereas others experienced their waiting period as healing in itself. Students’ initial experiences of therapy varied similarly. Some found this difficult due to the challenges it posed to their sense of self, while others felt the weight of societal attitudes or judgements regarding seeking support, sometimes hiding their attendance from their peers. Others reported commencing therapy as difficult due to having to face their issues or to share their feelings, and reported resisting attending at the beginning for these reasons. A few reported an increase in their anxiety as they commenced...
therapy, and reported that their counselling process actually interfered with their studies initially.

Most students in this study reported that their experience of therapy changed over time. For example, the topics that they wanted to discuss could vary over the sessions. Some students found that it helped them with the issues they wanted to address, whereas others experienced unexpected effects in other areas of their lives. A few students noted how their experience of the gender of their counsellor changed over therapy, and others found their rate of change varied over the course of their therapy.

Despite initial difficulties, most of the participants in this study described their counselling experience as more positive towards the end. At this point, the experience seemed to lose some of its stigma for them, and they described a reduction in their anxiety or a sense of achievement at having completed the process. However, while some reported that their sessions towards the end served to hold their concerns for them during the week, one student experienced therapy as increasing awareness regarding previously hidden issues without providing the means to fully address or resolve them.

These students also described several elements of their experiences after therapy. One noted the difficulty of maintaining the learning achieved in counselling, while others noted that there always remained further issues to be resolved. Several commented on the experience of participating in a qualitative research study such as this after therapy. A few appreciated the chance to thank the service that had helped them, and one student noted how, without the counselling, such frank sharing of experiences would not have been possible. Indeed, this student felt that going over the experiences again in a research interview actually helped to reinforce the gains achieved in therapy.

**What students think**

The students in this study reported many different outcomes of their therapy, both personal and studies-related. Amongst the personal outcomes listed were an increase in awareness or insight, an increased sense of self or identity, increases in self-acceptance or self-confidence, an increased ability to reach out to others, an increased sense of control, an increased ability to let go of past issues, a prevention of further decline in mental state, a reduction in stress levels, and/or the acquisition of new life skills or strategies. With regards to their academic experiences, it is important to note that some of the participants felt there was no direct relationship between their counselling and their academic performance, while others felt their counselling had a direct and positive effect on their studies.

**What does counselling do?**

The key outcomes of therapy included an increase in self-esteem and self-esteem, a prevention of further decline in mental state, a reduction in stress levels, and the acquisition of new life skills or strategies. With regards to the participants' academic experiences, it is important to note that some of the students felt their counselling had a direct and positive effect on their studies.

**Implications for practitioners**

Counsellors, psychotherapists and counselling psychologists working in higher education may find aspects of these findings relevant to their practice. For example, it is useful to be reminded of how difficult it is for some students to seek counselling. Some students, like some of the participants in this study, may also find therapy extremely difficult in its early stages. None of this will be news to practitioners, but,
particularly for those who have been working in HE for some time and are used to its routines, it may be useful to be reminded of these possibilities so that we can remain sensitive to our clients’ distress.

Practitioners may be interested to be reminded of precisely how students’ experiences of therapy can change over time as well, including some students’ changing experiences of the gender of their counsellor; perhaps this can assist us to remain consciously aware of the role of gender in the therapeutic relationship.

Another possible message from these findings is not to underestimate the power of simply giving troubled students a space to explore their experience, or even just a listening ear. While such elements of therapy may seem basic to us, these participants cited such common or non-specific factors as key to the change they experienced. Practitioners may feel this adds further support for a flexible or eclectic approach to therapy that views all theoretical orientations as equally beneficial.

Therapists may find it useful to read of how some student clients experience the interaction between their therapy and their studies as well. The in-depth description of just how difficult some clients find undergoing therapy at university, due to the challenge of juggling therapeutic work and coursework or to their fears that friends or colleagues may discover they are seeking help, may heighten practitioners’ sensitivities to these issues. Practitioners may also feel reminded of the importance of referring clients on to other services or support after therapy, should their counselling unearthsome more deep-seated and previously hidden issues.

But perhaps the most important implication from these findings for practitioners is that psychological therapy provided in a university setting can be beneficial to student clients, both personally and in terms of their studies. The fact that several participants were motivated to take part in this study in order to give something back or to thank their service may give therapists in HE some confidence that their work can be important and appreciated.

Implications for future research
These findings were produced from a single university counselling service, so similar studies carried out at other institutions could provide interesting comparisons. I may seek to develop this study into a PhD by using these initial findings to design a survey that could then be distributed among students who received therapy on campus, in order to quantify the extent to which these experiences are representative or generalisable. This procedure could be carried out at a number of universities to provide useful comparisons as well. Interested services or universities are welcome to get in touch.

Christine Ramsey-Wade is a counselling psychologist based in Bristol now working in independent mental health care services.

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References