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How accessible is counselling to young people?

Summary. This quantitative study explored young people's perspectives of counselling and examined how accessible counselling is to young people. The study population consisted of ninety-seven young people (aged 11 to 21) across three geographical locations within Shropshire. Questionnaires were used to gather evidence. The data was then analysed using constant comparative analysis. Themes identified included young people's perception of counselling, self-declared knowledge of where and how to access counselling, the likelihood of accessing counselling, and what young people would look for in a counselling environment. The results show that young people rate themselves as knowing a considerable amount about counselling.

Key words: counselling, young people, mental health, perspectives, understanding, barriers, practice

Introduction

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates the prevalence of mental distress as "one in six" people throughout the U.K. Mental distress can be defined as "a distressing psychological condition of the mind"¹.

McLaughlin identifies counseling as a therapeutic relationship which can provide favourable conditions to promote self-change and alleviate mental distress, through "the skill of listening, empathising, challenging and facilitating action"².

¹ www.century-health.com/glossary.asp [14.07.2007].

² K. Bovnair, C. McLaughlin (1999), counselling schools: a review: a reader. London: David Fulton, cited in Proctor, G. (1993), an overview of counselling in Britain today, p. 25.

McLaughlin sees the role of counseling as the ability to help people “grow in emotional fitness and health”³.

The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice also identifies counselling as an appropriate way of responding to children and young people with emotional or behavioural difficulties. Margaret Hodge, the Minister for Children, called for pastoral support for all children and linked these reforms to the provisions of counselling within schools.

This study was undertaken by a youth worker and counsellor located within the local area. Being a youth worker and a counsellor, the researcher is firstly aware of how counselling can benefit young people and help alleviate mental distress. Secondly, the researcher is surprised with the considerably low numbers of young people accessing counselling.

Current literature laments the lack of contemporary research that “focuses directly on the perspective of counselling”⁴, and therefore, the researcher believed that the reasons for young people not attending counselling could be investigated further.

Aims of the research

The aim of the research was to investigate young people’s perspectives of counselling and assess how accessible counselling is to young people.

Methodology

Design

A quantitative approach was chosen, as this was viewed as being most productive.

The questions in the questionnaire related to self-perceived knowledge of counselling, to what counselling involves, as well as, where and how young people believed they could access such services.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from North Wales Institute of Higher Education (N.E.W.I) and Shropshire County Council Youth Service (SCCYS). The research was conducted with reference to the ethical principles set out by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

³ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁴ P. Lambert, *Client perspectives on counselling*, Routledge, London 2007, p. 106.

Participants were provided with information regarding counselling and how they could access support services following their involvement in the study.

Findings

Firstly, Part A: records demographic detail on age and gender.

Then, Part B: records findings in relation to the ten questions contained within the questionnaire.

Part A: Demographic Detail

Table 1. Summary of gender

A) Male	B) Female
33	64

Table 2. Summary of age ranges

10 to 13 – Age Group (AG)	14 to 17 – Age Group (AG)	18 to 21 – Age Group (AG)
35	46	16

Part B: Findings from questionnaire (By numbered order)

Questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9 have been further cross-examined with regard to the age range of responses and the gender of respondents. For reasons of economy, and looking within the confines of this study, that analysis has not been necessary for questions 4, 8 and 10. See discussion chapter for further comments.

Table 3. Responses to Question 1 – Have you ever attended counselling?

A) Yes		B) No			
33		64			
Male	Female	Male	Female		
11	22	22	42		
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG
6	18	9	29	28	7

Table 4. Responses to Question 2 – How much would you say you know about counselling?

A) Nothing at all			B) A little			C) A moderate amount			D) Quite a lot			E) A lot		
25			34			25			11			2		
Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
10	15		11	23		10	15		1	10		1	1	
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG
17	7	1	8	20	6	8	12	5	2	6	3	0	1	1

Table 5. Responses to Question 3 – If you had a problem that you wanted to talk to somebody about, would you talk to a counsellor?

A) No: definitely not			B) No: probably not			C) Yes: probably			D) Yes: definitely		
28			33			32			4		
Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
16	12		9	24		8	24		0	4	
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG
11	12	5	7	20	6	17	12	3	1	3	0

Table 6. Responses to Question 4 – Where would you go to ask about accessing a counselling service? (Multiple responses were encouraged – 15 respondents gave multiple answers)

A) Doctors surgery	B) Teacher	C) Parent	D) Youth worker	E) Friend	E) Other
8	10	12	28	12	12

Table 7. Responses to Question 5 – What would you say counselling provides?

A) Don't know			B) Someone to talk to			C) Someone to advise you on what to do			D) Someone to tell you what to do			E) Someone to sort your problems out		
22			23			26			1			10		
Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
8	14		5	18		9	17		1	0		5	5	
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG
16	6	0	7	12	4	6	14	6	1	0	0	4	5	1

Table 8. Responses to Question 6 – For what reason would you attend counselling?

A) Don't know		B) Something to do		C) Because you are told to		D) Somebody to talk to		E) To help me cope		E) Other							
21		2		11		21		23		10							
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female						
8	12	1	2	1	8	7	14	9	18	2	4						
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG						
12	9	0	1	2	0	5	4	0	4	11	4	11	9	7	2	3	2

Table 9. Responses to Question 7 – What do you think that going to a counsellor means?

A) That you are looking for help to solve your own problems			B) That you are weak and unable to help yourself			C) That you are seeking to pass responsibility for your problems on to others			D) Other		E) Don't know					
56			5			3			13		16					
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female					
20	32	2	3	3	0	4	9	4	12							
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG					
20	23	11	0	5	0	1	0	2	7	2	4	10	5	1		

Table 10. Responses to Question 8 – Who you feel you would be most likely to talk to if you had a problem? (Multiple responses were encouraged – 17 respondents gave multiple answers)

A) Teacher	B) Counsellor	C) Parent	D) Youth worker	E) Friend	E) Other
4	4	17	8	38	9

Table 11. Responses to Question 9 – Do you think a young person is 'more' or 'less' likely to access counselling than an adult?

A) More likely			B) Less likely			C) Don't know			
28			27			40			
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
11	17	12	15	10	30				
10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	10 to 13 – AG	14 to 17 – AG	18 to 21 – AG	18 to 21 – AG
14	9	5	7	16	3	14	20	7	

Table 12. Responses to Question 10 – If you were to consider counselling, what would be the important factors which would influence your decision? (Multiple responses were encouraged – 53 respondents gave multiple answers)

A) That there is a short distance to travel	B) That there is a short waiting list	C) That there was a friendly atmosphere	D) That the counsellor was non-judgemental	E) That the relationship was confidential	F) Other
5	1	13	9	7	9

Discussion

As highlighted in the literature, this study has focused on young peoples' perspectives of counselling⁵. It has identified young peoples' self-declared understanding of counselling and explored how accessible counselling is to young people. Although the sample was taken from a range of ages, different living situations and genders, participants' perceptions and self-declared knowledge of counselling were fairly similar.

If the primary criterion of success for this research was to fully determine how accessible counselling was to young people then the evidence gathered cannot fully conclude with a definitive answer to this question. Whilst thirty-four percent of the respondents said that they had already attended counselling and thirty-two percent said they would probably see a counsellor if they needed to talk to somebody, only four percent said that they would choose a counsellor as the person they would be most likely to talk to if they had a problem.

If a second criterion for success was to find out the perceptions of what young people already know and feel about counselling then there is evidence to suggest that this has been the case. Even if one were to question the findings from the questionnaire, qualitative responses such as 'I think it's a good idea, it helps with your problems' and 'I believe counselling is fine for someone with whatever problems, at any age' implies that certain young people value counselling or perhaps the idea. However, what the research also showed is that this positive opinion about counselling is not widespread; and responses such as "Making sure the view of going to a counsellor changes because many view you as weak etc." suggests that counselling is not always viewed positively by all young people.

Data from a range of sources identified a number of valuable findings which have emerged from this research. This chapter is in ten sections and examines the responses given to the questions contained within the questionnaire.

⁵ Ibidem.

Analysis of Main Findings from the Individual Questions

1. The results of this study indicate that nearly 1/3 of the respondents from the questionnaire (32) have already accessed counselling in the past, with over half of these being in the 14 to 17 age group. Possible reasons for this may include the increased pressure from the U.K government to ensure that organisations working with young people strive to achieve all the five ECM (2005) outcomes. In doing this, perhaps these organisations are starting to acknowledge and value the positive benefits that counselling and other mental health services can offer young people, and in turn, help them to achieve all five ECM (2005) outcomes. This increased pressure from the U.K government can be viewed as especially pertinent in secondary schools in particular.
2. There was evidence to suggest that young people consider themselves to be knowledgeable when it comes to the subject of counselling. Thirty-five percent said they know 'A little' about counselling. Here, it should be noted that strongly positive responses regarding counselling were uncommon, with only two respondents saying they knew 'A lot' about counselling. But, the fact that these findings are supported by data, in which seventy-two percent of respondents either new 'A little', 'A moderate amount', or 'Quite a lot' about counselling suggests that young people rate themselves as possessing a good deal of knowledge regarding what counselling is. Lambert writes that "society itself is unclear"⁶ and each person in their own right is unique, therefore adopts their own internal ways of processing ideas, understanding situations and viewing the world. It is for these reasons therefore, that it is difficult to ascertain how much young people actually do know about counselling. With respect to differences in gender and age, multivariate analysis found significant differences only for gender. Data from a range of sources indicates that females, in comparison to males, rate themselves more knowledgeable regarding counselling.
3. With thirty-three respondents saying 'No: probably not'; and thirty-two saying 'Yes; probably' to the question that asks would you speak to a counsellor "If they had a problem that they wanted to talk to somebody about", evidence highlights a mixed response, regardless of age and gender. However, with only four participants saying 'Yes: definitely' and a larger twenty-eight saying 'No' they definitely would not, suggests that young people would generally not want to speak to a counsellor if they had a problem they needed to speak to somebody about.
4. Results imply that young people would firstly approach a Youth Worker about where to ask about accessing a counselling service. Here, it should be noted that the young people that participated in the study happened to be in the presence of Youth Workers when completing their questionnaires and per-

⁶ Ibidem, p. 111.

haps were unconsciously more positive in their responses than they normally would be. As McLeod writes; people who complete questionnaires “tend to give uniformly positive ratings”⁷ to their researcher.

5. The results confirm that young people on the whole tend to view counselling as a service which provides people with someone to advise them on what to do, or offers them someone to talk too. These findings suggest that respondents perceive counselling to be more autonomous, which offers an empowering environment instead of an autocratic and directive one which either tells you what to do or provides someone to sort your problems out for you.
6. The respondents were able to identify a number of reasons why people might choose to attend counselling; most were very specific choosing somebody to talk to, closely followed by to help me cope as their preferred reasons.
7. It is clear that the respondents’ perception of what they think going to a counsellor means, points towards looking for help to solve your own problems, compared to other possibilities such as the fact that you are weak and unable to help yourself or that you are seeking to pass responsibility for your problems on to others.
8. Despite nearly one in three saying they probably would speak to a counsellor if they had a problem that they wanted to talk to someone about, only four percent chose a counsellor as the most likely person they would go to talk to if they had a problem. A friend was by far the most popular choice here with forty percent of respondents choosing this option.
9. Results indicate that young people cannot determine whether or not young people were more or less likely to access counselling than adults.
10. In line with Rogers (1961), this study confirms the importance of providing a friendly, safe and warm environment for counselling to take place, with young people rating a friendly atmosphere as the most important factor which would influence their decision to attend counselling.

Although the findings suggest that young people are generally well informed regarding counselling, the researcher does not feel as if the evidence supplied convincingly supports the researcher’s perceptions and experience. There are a number of possibilities for this, which may relate to methodological or philosophical issues.

Methodological implications

In respect of the methodology and the use of questionnaires, the respondents may have distorted the truth through several possibilities. People may lie on questionnaires and surveys and the list of possible reasons for this include: faking

⁷ J. McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, 2ed., Sage, London 2003, p. 122.

knowledge, defensiveness, repressive coping style, inflated self-perception, denial, boredom, humor and flippant comments that have no meaning to the respondent⁸. Because of this, the research becomes very widespread and difficult to put into any definitive order, and some of the reasons for untruth go much deeper than others.

Philosophical implications

Some young people base their reason for lying on personal experiences, other reasons may be less conscious. Group dynamics may have a bearing on the respondents answers for instance if peers in the same group discuss what they have said and how they feel about the survey. Personality types can also have an effect on responses given on a questionnaire⁹.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that young people possess a positive perception of counselling and a good sound knowledge base of where and how to access such services. However, triangulation of these results with the work of others would suggest otherwise. The discussion section has fully explained possible reasons why there is such a discrepancy. At this time concluding on contradictory evidence would be problematic.

Points for further development

It is apparent to me that young people are relatively uninformed with regards to counselling. As a result of this study, the researcher has identified three key recommendations which may help promote counselling more effectively and make it more accessible to young people.

1. Advice and guidance on the nature of counselling – To enable young people to access such support networks there is a need to provide information in environments that are already accessible to young people such as schools, colleges and youth clubs. In line with Youth Matters: (YM) Green Paper (2005) organisations must seek to empathise with the fact that young people may at times want “to seek confidential information and advice, for example, on physical, emotional and mental health issues, from a trusted adult who is not linked to where they live or where they are studying” (p. 45).

⁸ www.stetson.edu/~bboozer/Survivor/day27.html [14.08.2007].

⁹ Ibidem.

2. Enhanced promotion of the service – Greater attention should be paid to the promotion of counselling as a coping strategy, and young people should be informed, or reminded, of the existence of such services and how to access these; negative assumptions about counselling should be counteracted, and counsellors should strive to be as familiar and friendly to young people as possible.
3. Identify the best methods of attaining the first two development agendas for young people – The jargon surrounding counselling represents a linguistic and conceptual barrier and therefore there is need to provide more accessible and easy to understand information regarding counselling. Lomas writes that “the nearer we stay to common speech the less likely we are to destroy the meaning of those who seek our help”¹⁰.

In conclusion, youth workers and policy makers alike still have a long hill to climb in order to make this vital service accessible to young people, many of whom are in desperate need of such an intervention.

Literature

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Czy poradnictwo psychologiczne jest dostępne dla młodych ludzi?

Streszczenie. W artykule, wykorzystując badania ilościowe, autorzy omawiają poradnictwo psychologiczne adresowane do młodych ludzi i analizują, w jakim stopniu jest ono dla nich dostępne. Badaniem objęto dziewięćdziesiąt siedem młodych osób (w wieku od 11 do 21 lat) w trzech lokalizacjach geograficznych na terenie Shropshire. Do zebrania materiału badawczego użyto kwestionariuszy. Następnie zebrane dane zostały poddane analizie z wykorzystaniem metody ciągłego porównywania. Wątki, które w trakcie badania zostały zidentyfikowane, dotyczyły postrzegania poradnictwa psychologicznego przez młodzież, deklarowanej wiedzy na temat miejsca i stopnia dostępności poradnictwa, prawdopodobieństwa skorzystania z usług poradniczych oraz tego, czego młodzi ludzie oczekują od środowiska zajmującego się poradnictwem. Wyniki pokazują, że młodzi ludzie oceniają siebie jako tych, którzy wiedzą dość dużo na temat poradnictwa psychologicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: poradnictwo, młodzież, młodzi ludzie, zdrowie psychiczne, perspektywy, zrozumienie, przeszkoda, praktyka

¹⁰ P. Lomas, *The case for personal psychotherapy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981, p. 109.