Premature termination of counselling at a university Counselling Centre

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Abstract. This study investigated premature termination of counselling at a university Counselling Centre. Twenty (20) premature terminators reported on their experience of counselling by completing a mailed questionnaire containing open- and close-ended items. The following results were obtained: Premature termination was not the result of a negative experience of counselling by the client; nor was premature termination the manifestation of a failed interpersonal relationship between the client and the counsellor; clients who terminated prematurely are likely to seek counselling again at a later stage in their lives; premature terminators would be likely to refer someone for counselling and premature terminators did not consider their participation in the study as violating the counsellor-client confidentiality. Limited support was established for the hypothesis that premature terminators will consider their expectations of counselling as not having been met.

Introduction

The negative impact of premature termination of psychological services is a cause for concern. Betz and Schulman (1979, p. 543) described premature termination as “a major barrier to the effective delivery of counselling services”. Premature termination is therefore commonly viewed as a breakdown of the counselling process and representing a drain on valuable and limited resources such as time and money. Professional skills are under-utilised while waiting-list clients are denied earlier access to these services.

Most published research on the utilisation of psychological services by Black students have been conducted on White American campuses where such students constitute a minority group within the dominant culture (Marx & Gelso, 1987; Tomlinson & Cope, 1988; Hardin, Subich & Holvey, 1988). A number of issues have been researched indicating that the minority position of these students influences their utilisation of counselling services. Black students, especially Black males, tend to underutilize counselling services aimed at promoting psychological and emotional wellbeing (Tomlinson & Cope, 1988) and display a negative attitude towards the counselling service (Westbrook & Smith, 1976). Different rates of premature terminations have also been recorded depending on the composition of the clientele within a particular context. Using a
general student sample, Krauskopf, Baumgardner and Mandracchia (1981) reported a 19% premature termination rate, Betz and Schulman (1979) reported a 24% premature termination rate and Epperson (1981) a 25% premature termination rate. This contrasts with a study conducted by Sue and Mckinney (1974) with “minority” students reporting a 50% termination rate. While a number of confounding variables may make a direct comparison between these studies undesirable, the potential significance of the academic context of the student and their social backgrounds in relation to their utilisation of counselling services is worth noting.

Premature termination is generally regarded as a negative therapeutic outcome in that the counsellor considers the therapeutic process as being incomplete. This view has been contested by researchers who conducted follow-up studies with clients who drop out of therapy and found that the termination is not necessarily experienced as a negative treatment outcome (Acosta, 1980; Pekarik, 1983). It may indicate that the client considers the problem as having been resolved, or that substantial symptomatic relief has been obtained or effective support systems developed outside of the therapeutic relationship.

Acosta (1980) raised the criticism that there are virtually no data available where clients state in their own words the reason(s) for terminating therapy. Pekarik (1983) posited a possible reason for this as relating to the difficulty of contacting clients who have rejected services. The notion that premature termination is by implication a negative therapeutic outcome also tends to discount the possible significance of their client’s engagements and interactions (intra- and inter-personal) outside of the therapeutic session. The significance of the counselling session should be seen in relation to the rest of the client’s life as but one significant influencing factor. The existence and/or restoration of support structures outside of the therapeutic relationship is therefore an important factor to consider in developing an understanding of premature termination.

Manthei (1996) in his study of 33 no-show clients and 13 clients who failed to return for counselling found that the 7 out of eight of the latter group who had reported improvement indicated that their single counselling session had contributed to that improvement. Two of the five clients in the “no change after one session” group still reported that their counselling session had been of some use. Manthei (1996) concluded that most of the early termination clients in his study were motivated to change and were willing to use counselling and other means to initiate such change.

Enquiring about the clients subjective adjustment or degree of improvement should provide a more nuanced understanding of the client’s termination of counselling – from the perspective of the client – rather than viewing the counselling session as the only arena where psychological distress and adjustment are mediated.

The main focus of this study was to elicit from clients their self-stated reasons for premature termination of counselling. The study further attempted