

2012

Counsellors' Perceptions of Counselling Western Australian Drug Court Clients

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Introduction

- The Drug Court of Western Australia provides treatment and diversionary options to offenders whose addiction to drugs and/or alcohol has played a part in their offending.
- The advantages of diversion into education and treatment is to address problematic drug addictions, potentially giving offenders the chance to educate themselves about the risks of long term drug use and the ability to identify the causes of drug use and offending (Hughes & Ritter, 2008).
- There are concerns regarding the potential impacts on the therapeutic relationship when counselling a court-referred client and whether or not mandated counselling is effective in assisting clients to address their drug use and offending behaviour.
- Although individuals volunteer to take part in the Drug Court, there is a belief that this may be to avoid a prison sentence, rather than motivation to address their drug problems (Miller, 2004)

Research

- Some potential issues which may arise when a client is mandated to counselling include; The client thinking that they do not require counselling, the clients may in fact, not have a drug or alcohol problem, the clients do not choose their treating counsellor, clients cannot change counsellors or freely end the counselling sessions, that the consequences of leaving counselling may force compliance and that these clients are entering counselling without the appropriate knowledge of the program or counselling process (Shearer, 2000).
- The main concern of treating non-voluntary clients is in regards to therapeutic change, which occurs when the client feels free to be himself (Slonim-Nevo, 1996).
- It is difficult to determine whether or not the non-voluntary client feels able to express himself as he would if he attended counselling voluntarily, which may be a result of knowing that the counsellors may be asked to testify in court or for their reports to be subpoenaed (Honea-Boles & Griffin, 2001).
- Establishing a therapeutic relationship is very difficult when treatment is mandated and that this conflicts with the goals of treatment.
- It is important to determine whether the counsellors' relationship to the drug court affects the therapeutic relationship and how (Honea-Boles & Griffin, 2001).

Research

- Studies in this area have been inconsistent, with Howard and McCaughrin (1996) reporting that clients referred by court were less successful in treatment outcomes than non court-referred clients.
- In contrast, Pompei and Resnick (1987), who studied program treatment completion rates, state that the awareness of potential consequences of leaving treatment, particularly that of imprisonment, often assists court-referred clients to continue with clinical treatment regardless of their willingness to face these issues. Pompei and Resnick (1987) also found court-referred clients to be more successful in counselling when compared to voluntary clients.
- Many issues arise when working with court-referred clients, particularly the effectiveness of treatment when the client has not volunteered to address their problem.
- Another issue is whether or not the counsellor uses similar therapeutic techniques when dealing with both voluntary and non-voluntary clients, and if not, how these techniques may differ (Slonim-Nevo, 1996).
- Honea-Boles and Griffin (2001) suggest that the goals of treatment should be determined by the counsellor and the client, not the referring courts as therapy can be disrupted when it is mandated to cover specific goals rather than trying to engage the client.



Research

- The above literature raises concerns regarding the efficacy of the counselling of drug court referred clients and how this may impact the therapeutic relationship.
- It is difficult to determine if compulsory counselling will be, or is providing effective and therapeutic treatment to clients in facing their addictions.
- The lack of information currently available to counsellor's makes it difficult to understand the obstacles which counsellors may face when counselling court referred clients.
- My objective is to explore the counsellors' perceptions of Drug Court clients and the potential impact of the court referral process on the therapeutic relationship between counsellor and court-referred client.
- I hope to provide a better understanding of the issues facing counsellors of drug court-referred clients and to identify areas of concern which may need to be addressed in order to improve efficacy of treatment.

Research Design

Methodology

Participants

- Ten counsellors from a variety of agencies were interviewed, All participants were practitioners from treatment providers working alongside the Drug Court of Western Australia.
- The initial step to recruiting participants was to gain consent from Western Australian Networks of Alcohol and Other Drug Agencies (WANADA). The Drug and Alcohol Diversion Manager assisted in providing a list of contacts with whom they refer their clients. This contact list then enabled the researcher to make initial contact with treatment providers via email with a brief synopsis of the proposed study. Department of Corrective Services Research and Evaluation Committee contacted the researcher and arranged a meeting to discuss the study. Once approval was granted for the research to be conducted, interviews were arranged at a time and place suitable for each participant.



Research Design

Procedures....

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the practitioners which were audio recorded to ensure data was not missed. Interviews were then transcribed into an electronic format and coded for confidentiality. To further ensure confidentiality, once the audio recordings were transcribed, all audio recordings were destroyed.
- The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and prompts, used to elicit as much in-depth information from participants as possible. Interviews were no longer than 45 minutes.



Findings – Work In Progress

The interview transcripts are currently being analysed using thematic analysis with Microsoft Excel.

Some of the themes which are expected to be identified include:

1. Trust
2. Motivation
3. Resistance

Further subthemes are also expected once data analysis is complete.



Conclusions

Limitations: A potential limitation of the research findings may be that it is difficult to apply identified concerns to other problem solving courts. Identified areas of concern may also not apply to other states and/or countries as this research focused on Western Australian Drug Court referred clients.

Future research may benefit from replicating this study with other problem solving courts and in different states. It may also be beneficial to research what length of treatment is effective when working with drug court referred clients.

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