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The perceived impact of services rendered by Lay Counsellors

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1 Aim

The purpose of this study is to investigate and describe how victims of crime in Johannesburg perceive services rendered by lay counsellors at a victim support centre. In particular, the aim was to determine whether victims of crime, who have encountered face-to-face interventions with lay counsellors, perceive these interventions as helpful, hindering or having no effect on their ability to cope after a traumatic incident.

2 Rationale

Violent crime in South Africa has become part of the daily life of many South Africans and has enormous emotional, physical and financial implications for those affected by it. Victim support centres have long been established to meet the ever-increasing need for available, appropriate and accessible services offered to those affected by violent crime (Golden, 1991). According to Potter (2000, p.8), 'victim support provided the highest level of help', and the 'demand for such help again underlined the need for more resources and funding for victim support'. Meaningful interpretations of the perceived impact of interventions could therefore be beneficial to lay counsellors and stakeholders alike. Knowing whether interventions are helpful or hindering, may either motivate lay counsellors to continue their voluntary participation or drive them to seek methods that would make the interventions more beneficial. The outcome, whether perceived as helpful, hindering or having no effect, also has an impact on the raising and allocation of funds to the centres.

Since support centres exist to offer services to those affected by crime, it is appropriate to investigate how victims themselves perceive the interventions offered to them. It will therefore be investigated whether these interventions are perceived

as helpful, hindering or having no effect, whether volunteers are perceived as making a difference and whether the interventions should be changed in order to meet the real and perceived needs of victims. By asking those who receive the services how they perceive these interventions, a meaningful interpretation can be made about the impact of these services.

While research has previously been done on lay counsellor's perceptions of the interventions, the models used and victim support centres, little formal research has been done on the victim's perceptions of the impact of services rendered by lay counsellors in South Africa ("Can Anyone Help", 2004; Eagle, 1998; Frieberg, 2001; Hajiyiannis & Robertson, 1999; Hunot, 1998; "More Support", 2004; Potter, 2000). Although the annual report submitted by the National Audit Office in Britain noted that services are positively perceived by victims, the view expressed in this article cannot be generalized to support centres in South Africa, as crime statistics, the nature of violent crime and the population is too different in South Africa ("NAO Praises", 2003).

Much debate centres on the effectiveness of interventions following a traumatic incident and although many studies have been done on either the helpful or harmful effect of these interventions, to date few conclusions have been reached (Fullerton, Ursano, Vance, & Wang, 2002). While Labardee (2002) maintains that it is absurd to suggest that trauma counselling is not beneficial, it has been argued that support services may actually delay the normal healing process and prolong trauma in victims (Fattah, 1986, in Frieberg, 2001; Friedman, 2003). The uncertainty about the effect of interventions after an incident therefore warrants more research before conclusions can be drawn (Bisson, McFarlane & Rose, 2000, in Peterson, 2001).

This study will therefore focus on determining whether victims of crime, who have encountered face-to-face interventions with lay counsellors, perceive these interventions as helpful, hindering or having no effect on their ability to cope after a traumatic incident.

3 Research Question

The overall aim of this research is to investigate how victims of crime perceive the impact of services rendered by lay counsellors following a traumatic incident. As such the following questions have been formulated:

- How do victims perceive interventions by lay counsellors?
- Do victims perceive interventions as helpful, hindering or having no effect in the coping process?
- What aspects of the intervention do victims perceive as particularly helpful?
- What changes could be made to the interventions so that they might be of greater benefit to the victims?

4 Methodology

An exploratory study was conducted to investigate the perceived impact of services rendered by lay counsellors. This type of study was done in order to make an introductory enquiry into this reasonably unfamiliar area of research (Durrheim, 1999). The research was qualitative in nature, in order to gain a rich in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of victims of crime. Further details pertaining to the methodology of this study will be discussed at length in chapter three.

5 Outcome

The expected outcome of this applied research is a description of victim's perceived impact of services rendered by lay counsellors after a traumatic incident. The results of this study are based on participant's perceptions and therefore cannot be generalised beyond the confines of this setting. The results are however considered valuable as they could contribute to future studies on the viability of replicating such centres, decision making about support centres and interventions used and the allocation of funds by various organizations or government. Furthermore, the results could encourage volunteers to continue their efforts and motivate victims to make use of the services offered to them.

6 Chapter Outline of the Research Report

Chapter 1 has given an overview of the aim and rationale of the study, of the research questions to be explored, of the methodology and of the expected outcome. Chapter 2, the literature review, will focus on literature which gives a definition and explanation of trauma, looks at crime statistics in South Africa, defines what a victim support centre is, what lay counselling is and what these counsellors do. It also defines debriefing or short-term interventions, focuses on relevant theories and finally considers the models used by trauma counsellors. Chapter 3 presents the research design and methodology used in this study and begins with an explanation of what a qualitative study is. The participants will also be considered in terms of the sample size, demographic and other criteria for inclusion in this study, and how participants were found. Data collection will be explained according to the instruments used, procedure and time-frames, before exploring briefly what thematic content analysis is and how it was used in this study. Chapter 4 will then focus on the presentation and discussion of the results obtained in this study where consideration will be given to the various themes which emerged and what meaning these have in terms of this research. Chapter 5 will focus on the limitations of this study and recommendations for future studies and for the support centres specifically before concluding with an integration of the central findings with the aim of this study.