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The perceived impact of services rendered by Lay Counsellors

Stanbury, Claire

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Chapter 5

Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

This exploratory study was conducted in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of victims of crime who receive this support and to guide further research in this relatively unfamiliar area of research in South Africa. This final chapter will begin with a focus on the limitations of this study and then consider the recommendations for further research and for the support centre. These recommendations can also be used by the relevant stakeholders to improve the services rendered by lay counsellors so that the interventions might be of greater benefit to the victims. This chapter will then be concluded by summarising the central findings and drawing together the study as a whole.

1 Limitations

- The first limitation recognised in this study relates to the type of crime that the victims experienced, as this was not specified in this study. This is considered to be a limitation, as participant's perceptions about the interventions may have been influenced by the perceived severity of the incident.

- Although the results obtained suggests that marital status, language and personality type may have had an influence on the participant's ability to cope and on their perceptions of the interventions, this cannot be verified through the qualitative research method used in this study. These extraneous factors were also not controlled for in this study and may therefore have been a limitation. While all the participants in the study could speak English fluently, not all participants considered English to be their first language. Language may therefore have had an influence in this study, as all the English-speaking women perceived the intervention as helpful, while the Afrikaans-speaking women perceived the

intervention as either helpful in the short-term only, or having no effect. Hajiyiannis and Robertson (1999) mention that one of the limitations of the Wits Trauma Intervention Model is that it relies heavily on verbal communication. The counsellor in both cases where the intervention was not perceived as helpful, was English speaking. This may therefore have played a role, as participants may not have been able to express themselves appropriately. Although it could only be suggested that these may be reasons for the differing perceptions between the English and Afrikaans participants, it is unclear to what extent language played a role in this study.

- Another limitation relates to participants willingness to participate in this study. Two participants mentioned that they only agreed to participate in this study as they had a positive experience. While not all participants in this study perceived the intervention as helpful, none reported being adversely affected by the intervention. The reasons for subjects choosing not to participate in this study are unclear.

- Another limitation relates to the inability to generalise these findings beyond the confines of this setting due to the research methodology. The sample size, drawing the sample from only one support centre, making use of non-random sampling methods, obtaining results based on participant's subjective experiences and doing qualitative research is considered to be limiting, as replication of this study may not be possible.

- A further limitation may be the time lapse between the intervention and the interview, as the participant's inability to remember all the details from the intervention may have influenced their perceptions of these interventions.

- A final limitation relates to the measurement process. The instrument used to guide the face-to-face interview process, was designed for use in this study and therefore the validity of this instrument could not be assured.

2 Recommendations

- It has been suggested in this study that factors such as the type of crime, the participant's marital status, their language and their personality type, may have influenced the participant's perceptions of the interventions. It is recommended that future quantitative studies investigate the influence of these factors in more depth, in order to assess what impact they may have on the individual's perceptions about the effectiveness of services rendered by lay counsellors. It is further recommended that future research obtain information regarding the reasons why some subjects would not participate and what their perceptions of the interventions were.

- The results of this study also suggest that it is unclear whether participants still experienced symptoms due to ineffective interventions, or due to the nature of the traumatic incident. In order to contribute to the longstanding debate as to whether interventions alleviate, improve or worsen the symptoms following a traumatic incident, it is recommended that researchers embark on a longitudinal study with victims of crime.

- It is also unclear whether the symptoms experienced by these participants arose due to the knowledge that they may arise, or whether individuals found it comforting to know that what they were experiencing was normal. Further research into the possible adverse effects of normalising the symptoms and the overall impact this may have on the interventions, is considered to be essential. It is further recommended that research into the effectiveness of re-telling the story is undertaken, as results from this study indicate that the amount of re-telling and the content which is re-told may bear more weight than previously anticipated.

- It is also recommended that the time lapse between the intervention and the interview be more carefully considered in order to gain more accurate perceptions of the interventions. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of what an appropriate time-frame would be between the incident and the intervention, it

would be beneficial to assess what influence time has in future research. It has been recognised that the results obtained in this study cannot be generalized to other situations and it is therefore recommended that future research in this area consider these limitations in order to broaden the applicability of the results obtained.

- The results of this study also suggested that telephonic counselling may be sufficient and that face-to-face interventions may not be necessary. Further research into this area is considered highly beneficial, as this may impact the replication of such support centres in the future.

- Research relating to the location of the counselling room and the limitations regarding the support centre's connection with the police is also advised so that the issues recognised in these areas can be addressed. A recommendation made by a participant regarding the counselling room was that clearly marked signposts be erected so that victims do not have to queue in the police station for directions. It was also recommended that lay counsellors assess the sensitivity of the case before engaging in an intervention in a public place.

- It has been suggested by participants that not many people know about this service and that more should be done to make individuals more aware of the services rendered at the support centre. One participant suggested that the support centre should advertise on ATM bank machines.

- Participants also suggested that the police should not only let the victims know about the service at the crime scene, but that they also give victims the support centres contact details.

- Participants recommended that the same counsellor deal with their case as it was not found to be beneficial to be handed over to a new counsellor. It was further

suggested by participants in this study that it would be beneficial if the counsellors gave them feedback on any progress related to their case.

- It was also recommended that lay counsellors should call participants again after a couple of months to establish whether they need further support.

- It was further felt that more practical assistance was needed, although participants did not specify what this entailed. Some participants did recommend that somebody should help the victims with self-defence, journey work, practical visualisations or something 'unorthodox' in order to heal at different levels.

- Finally, it was recommended that the lay counsellors receive some kind of reward and that this did not necessarily have to be a monetary reward.

3 Conclusion

Much debate centres on the effectiveness of interventions following a traumatic incident. Although many studies have been done on either the helpful or harmful effect of these interventions, few conclusions have yet been reached. The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe whether participants, who had encountered face-to-face interventions with lay counsellors at a support centre in Johannesburg, perceived these interventions as helpful, hindering or having no effect on their ability to cope after a traumatic incident. These results would in turn contribute to the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of these interventions.

The results in this study have indicated that while some participants found the intervention to be helpful, one found it helpful in the short-term only and another did not perceive this intervention as having an effect. None found it hindering in their ability to cope with the traumatic incident however. Although these results are considered too varied to conclude the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of interventions, the results are considered invaluable in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the perceived impact of the services rendered by lay counsellors. It

is further maintained that although the results in this study cannot be generalised to other settings, they are considered valuable in contributing to future studies on the viability of replicating such centres in other areas. These results may also guide future decisions about support centres and encourage volunteers and coordinators to make the changes necessary to meet the ever-increasing needs of individuals using these services. The results have also indicated that victims need to become more aware of the services available to them and in turn motivate victims to make use of services offered to them.

The results also indicate that although participants felt that there is a need for services which are more cost-effective, fast, available and accessible than the limited professional services offered to the many victims who are affected by crime, most participants in this study preferred a psychologist to a lay counsellor. While training and cost were explored as possible explanations, the need for more in-depth counselling could also have influenced the participant's preference for seeing a psychologist rather than a lay counsellor. The results indicated that there may have been certain biographical factors such as marital status, language and whether they had experienced previous traumas influencing their perceptions. This could also not be concluded as the results were too varied.

The timing of the interventions in this study is considered to correspond with literature suggesting that the timing of interventions is crucial. Participants who had been contacted soon after the incident found this to be highly beneficial and went for more sessions than those who were contacted much later. Although no participants reported being re-traumatized due to the early re-exposure of traumatic material, the results could indicate that being assessed too quickly during an intervention may also be a disadvantage. Although not all the participants felt that the number of interventions they attended were sufficient, none felt that they had been harmed by having so few interventions.

Even though the results varied in the participant's perceptions about whether their symptoms had been alleviated, improved or worsened, this did not seem to influence their perceptions about the services rendered by the lay counsellors. Those participants who perceived the interventions as helpful did so despite perceiving an alleviation or worsening of their symptoms. Results also indicated that the participant's general way of coping may have influenced their perceptions of the interventions. While the results indicated that most participants in this study found it beneficial to re-tell their story, the results also indicated that the amount of re-telling and the content which is re-told may be significant. The results also indicate that normalising the symptoms and addressing self-blame or survivor guilt was perceived as beneficial by most participants in this study. While none of the participants really felt that they were able to establish meaning and understanding about the incident after the intervention, this is considered to be in line with literature, which maintains that the interventions are too short for meaning to be created successfully.

Although there is literature suggesting that the functions of the support centre are limited due to the link between the lay counsellors and the police, this could not be verified. Not all participants experienced these limitations and some participants even felt that the link between the counsellors and the police was positive, as it was good to have somebody to liaise with the police for them. Participants did not respond positively to the support centre being located within the police station however.

It could therefore be concluded that the participants in this study had varied perceptions about whether the interventions were helpful, hindering or having no effect on their ability to cope with a traumatic incident and that there are various factors that may have influenced these perceptions. The aspects which participants found to be particularly helpful and those which were not perceived as beneficial have also been considered. This was done in order to make recommendations about changes which could be considered in order to make interventions more effective.

This exploratory study is therefore considered to have addressed the research question it aimed to answer. It is also considered to have contributed to a more in-depth understanding of how victims of crime perceive the impact of services rendered by lay counsellors following a traumatic incident. This study is therefore considered to have made an introductory enquiry into this reasonably unfamiliar area of research in South Africa and could therefore guide future research in investigating questions or issues which arose as a result of this research.