Young People’s Expectations, Preferences and Experiences of Seeking Help from a Youth Mental Health Service and the Effects on Clinical Outcome, Service Use and Future Help-Seeking Intentions

A dissertation by

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Submitted to the University of Canberra Faculty of Health as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Clinical Psychology

University of Canberra, ACT, Australia

December 2013

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Abstract

Objective: Young people represent a vulnerable age group for mental health concerns and tend not to seek help. Client expectations and preferences related to roles, therapy processes and outcomes of therapy have been linked with engagement, help-seeking, and clinical outcomes for adults, however, very little is known regarding the effects of these factors on young people’s help-seeking experience. This thesis by published works makes an original contribution to knowledge by comprehensively examining young people’s expectations, preferences and actual experience of therapy and the effects of these factors on therapy outcomes and also addresses a number of methodological weaknesses in previous research. This thesis is comprised of five research papers: paper one aimed to qualitatively explore young people’s pre-treatment expectations of therapy; papers two and three aimed to quantitatively examine relationships and differences between young people’s expectations, preferences, and experience of therapy as well as age and gender effects; the fourth paper aimed to explore the effects of expectations, preferences and experience of therapy on clinical outcome, mental health service use, and future help-seeking intentions; and paper five aimed to examine the effects of disconfirmed expectations on these important outcome variables.

Method: The methodology involved a longitudinal multi-method design with qualitative, cross-sectional, and prospective components. Participants in the qualitative study included 20 young people aged 12-25 years who participated in a brief interview immediately prior to their initial assessment at a youth mental health care service, which was targeted at mild to moderate early presentations of mental health problems. Participants involved in the quantitative study included a total of 228 young people aged 12-25 years who completed an initial questionnaire on contact with the youth mental health care service, and of these, 102 who completed a follow-up questionnaire two months later.

Results: The most prominent theme that emerged from the qualitative study was that young people were unsure of what to expect from attending a mental health service. The quantitative study found that young people’s preferences for therapy were very optimistic, whereas initial expectations and actual experience of therapy were significantly more pessimistic. Females were less likely to expect the therapist to like and accept them or expect the therapist to self-disclose when compared to males. Younger participants had lower preferences to be motivated, open, and personally responsible in therapy and were more likely to expect the therapist to be directive when compared to older adolescents and young adults.
people’s actual experiences of therapy and their preference for personal commitment were positively associated with the outcome variables; however no significant associations were evident for initial expectations. Further, young people whose actual experience of therapy was more negative than their initial expectations related to the therapist’s role and processes of therapy had a poorer clinical outcome and attended fewer sessions. Finally, young people who had a negative experience of their role as a client attended fewer sessions and those who had negative expectations and experience related to their outcome had a poorer clinical outcome.

Conclusions: Results indicate that young people require age appropriate education on what to expect from seeking help from mental health services and highlight a need for clinicians to help young consumers to have realistic expectations as well as a positive experience of therapy. Further, the client’s level of personal commitment in the therapeutic relationship was strongly identified as a factor that needs to be promoted and maintained. It is important that clinicians work collaboratively with younger consumers, build a strong therapeutic alliance, and tailor psychological interventions to meet the clients’ individual needs, desires and expectations as this will promote engagement and more positive clinical outcomes.

Key words: Client Expectations, Clinical Outcomes, Engagement, Preferences, Psychotherapy, Young People.
Submitted Manuscripts, Presentations, and Publications

This thesis by published works is comprised of five research papers. The first research paper is a qualitative study titled ‘Exploring Young People’s Expectations of a Youth Mental Health Care Service’ and presents the main themes that emerged from brief interviews which explored young people’s pre-treatment expectations for therapy. This paper has been peer-reviewed and published in the journal *Early Intervention in Psychiatry* in June 2012. A seminar presentation of these qualitative research findings was presented at the Australian Psychological Society Conference in Canberra, 2011.

The second research paper reports on the cross-sectional quantitative data set and is titled ‘What do Young People Seeking Professional Help Want and Expect from Therapy?’ and examines differences between expectations and preferences for therapy as well as age and gender differences. This paper has been peer-reviewed and published in the *World Academy of Science, Engineering, and Technology Journal* in June 2012. An oral presentation of this quantitative research was presented at the International Congress of Applied Psychology and Behavioural Sciences (ICAP-BS) in Paris, 2012.

The third quantitative research paper titled ‘Young People’s Expectations, Preferences, and Actual Experience of Youth Mental Health Care’ builds on paper three by examining the relationships and differences between expectations, preferences and actual experience of therapy and also explores age and gender effects. This paper has been peer-reviewed and published in the *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* in April 2013.

The fourth quantitative research paper titled ‘Young People’s Expectations, Preferences and Experiences of Therapy: Effects on Clinical Outcome, Service Use and Help-Seeking Intentions’ examines the impact of expectations, preferences and actual
experience of therapy on the important outcome variables of engagement, clinical outcome and help-seeking. This paper has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in the journal *Clinical Psychologist* in November 2013 (Manuscript ID: CPAPS-2013-041).

The fifth quantitative research paper titled ‘Disconfirmed Expectations of Therapy and Young People’s Clinical Outcome, Help-Seeking Intentions, and Mental Health Service Use’ examines the effects of expectancy confirmation and disconfirmation on clinical outcome, engagement and help-seeking intentions. This paper has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in the journal *Advances in Mental Health* in September 2013 (Manuscript ID: AMH4278).
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude and appreciation to the chair of my research panel Professor Debra Rickwood, whose expertise, passion for research, and ongoing commitment and support has been truly inspiring. Without her extensive experience and consistent and greatly valued help this thesis would not be possible. I cannot thank Deb enough for all her help, persistence and guidance over the past five years.

I would also like to thank Dr Thea Vangas for all her encouragement and valuable feedback during the initial phases of my research.

I would further like to thank my secondary panel member Dr Bruce Stevens for proof reading my thesis and providing insightful feedback during the final stages of my research.

I would like to thank the University of Canberra for supporting and funding this research project.

I would also like to thank all of the staff at headspace ACT for welcoming my research project and allowing me to collect data, and to also express my utmost appreciation to the young consumers who agreed to participate in this project.

To my fellow PhD candidates Kelly and Josie, I have greatly appreciated having you there through the highs and lows that came with this research journey. I truly could not have done this without you.

Last, but absolutely not least, I would like to thank my loving and tremendously supportive family and friends.
To my wonderful husband Adam, you have been by my side for the past ten years and have been a reliable and supportive shoulder for me to lean on during the times when I felt like this research project would never come to an end. You have always believed in me, and constantly reminded me that I could achieve what at times felt like the impossible. To my amazing parents, who encouraged me and trusted in my ability to pursue a clinical PhD in the first place. Mum, your unconditional love, support, and positive energy has been a pillar of strength to keep me motivated and inspired to continue this journey. Dad, your passion for education, thirst for knowledge, and endless love has helped me throughout my life and especially during my research journey. I remember you once saying to me “Darling, I have finally discovered the meaning of life… it is to learn”…

This thesis is dedicated to all of these very special people.
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