

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore deeply and describe clearly young people's perceptions of counselling and to use the insights gained as the basis for designing a model of delivery for a Youth Counselling Service in Shropshire which would maximise access for young people.

It seems entirely appropriate to consult service users about the design of services but my interest in their views was deeper than practical considerations about service design and included their wider perceptions of counselling since I felt that decisions about whether to access counselling services are rooted in these. In order to maximise access we need to understand those perceptions which young people carry which may block or facilitate their access to counselling services so that we can design services, publicity, education and outreach work around these issues. The study was based on the belief that young people themselves hold the key to accessing this hard to reach group. The most appropriate design to adopt for the research was thus an emergent design which allowed the respondents to guide the direction of the study. I needed to achieve a deep insight into the perceptual world of the participants and thus interviews with respondents were chosen as more appropriate than use of questionnaires or fixed instruments. The sample used in the study is described in detail above (p.18).

The interview transcripts were analysed using the constant comparative method designed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This involved photocopying, coding and unitising the data and then grouping the units into categories of similar meaning. Each category was described by a prepositional statement. Initially four main categories emerged. In Appendix I the data is fully presented within these categories in the form of verbatim extracts from the interviews with little additional comment from the author except that needed to connect the data and arrange it into a meaningful sequence. From this it became clear that the four categories could be regrouped to form two main categories, the first concerning those factors which block access to counselling and the second concerned with those factors which facilitate access. In the outcomes section the main emerging themes are summarised under these two headings.

The factors which block access to counselling include:

- Internal blocks which relate to the way young people perceive themselves and their difficulties.
- Perceptions of counselling per se, in particular a lack of understanding of the counselling process, the counselling relationship, the nature of difficulties suitable for counselling, negative stereotypical images of clients and a lack of knowledge about help available and how to access it.
- The transference of expectations from other relationships with adults onto the counselling relationship, in particular a lack of confidence in adults to share their perceptual world, a lack of trust in their right to confidentiality and an expectation of a negative/punitive response.

- Prevalent attitudes and values in society in relation to how to deal with difficulties, in particular the views that help seeking is negative, that talking about problems does not help, that it is shameful to share deep feelings (particularly for men).
- Societal stereotypes of 'appropriate helpers' which suggest that help should only be sought from a known person either within the family or a close friend and that sharing with 'strangers' is unacceptable (although acknowledged by some to be attractive).

The factors which facilitate access to counselling include:

- A clear and trustworthy promise of confidentiality.
- A counselling service offering the characteristics young people want. Specifically they require it to be discrete, accessible, informal, integrated with other services and free of charge.
- Promotion of the service by education, outreach work and publicity aimed at raising awareness and changing perceptions in order to remove perceptual blocks in individuals and in the peer group.

The discussion of the outcomes presented above (p.41) indicates considerable support for the outcomes of the present study in the literature reporting findings elsewhere. This coincidence of views suggests that the outcomes of this study may be of some relevance elsewhere in understanding how young people view counselling and how service design can be used to facilitate access by addressing blocks to service use.

It seems also that the outcomes could have relevance in understanding inhibitions to formal help seeking in other groups and individuals within society. In particular the

stereotypical attitudes of society towards seeking help and help seekers seem relevant. Issues, of loss of power and control seem likely to be of relevance to the minority groups and the lack of understanding of the counselling process and relationships may be relevant in the wider population. The transference of expectations derived in other relationships onto the counselling relationship is a common phenomena in counselling and may discourage many adults from seeking help.

Eminent writers such as Dryden (1994) and Clarkson (1995) both cited above have begun to raise awareness within the counselling community of the need to review its current theories, process and practice in the light of “the changed cultural context” (Clarkson 1995) in which it now operates. Future research indicated by this study includes the following: further investigation re blocks and facilitation of access among a wider sample; the advantages/disadvantages of offering an integrated service; implications of less formal “counselling” interventions; the implications of multiple roles for counsellors and clients; appropriate ways of “reaching out” to potential clients and appropriate content of publicity materials aimed at raising awareness of the possibilities and process of counselling.

The primary aim of this study was to explore and present the perceptions of young people in Shropshire which are of relevance to the creation, operation and promotion of a Youth Counselling Service. I concur with Feaviour’s (1994) view that

“If we are to provide effective services, it is crucial that we listen to the users. Youth information, advice and counselling services will not operate to their full potential if they do not understand young people. It is vital that we listen.” (Feaviour 1994).

This is not enough, however, for having listened and reflected here we need to act on the basis of what we have learned. According to (Maykut and Morehouse 1994 p147) “the ultimate test of trustworthiness of a qualitative study is whether we believe the findings strongly enough to act on them.”

The perceptions of young people explored here and the outcomes which flow from them will provide the basis for determining the shape of the Youth Counselling Service in Shropshire. The true test of the validity of this research will therefore be our success in accessing young people to this service.

In light of the outcomes of this study I would make the following recommendations in setting up a Youth Counselling Service:

- In practical terms the service should aim to be accessible, discrete, flexible, responsive, informal, free and offer continuity and an integrated service. A clear and firm Confidentiality contract is essential.
- The service needs to be promoted by outreach work aimed at raising awareness and altering young people’s attitudes to counselling. Such work should use experiential techniques whenever possible. Education and Information needs to focus on the following issues: common difficulties which can be helped in counselling, stereotypical attitudes towards help seeking; appropriate helpers; the power of counselling to help; the nature of counselling and the counselling relationship; confidentiality.
- The model of counselling employed must be acceptable to young people, particularly in the light of transgenerational expectations about the balance of power in relationships with adults.

- The reluctance of young people to seek formal help can be addressed by acknowledging and strengthening the capacity to help of those who are in contact with young people in other ways and in whom they trust. This may involve improving the skills of these workers to enable them to offer counselling and to renegotiate appropriate boundaries in order to do this. Alternatively it may be appropriate to raise their awareness of the possibilities of counselling and their referral skills.