

A Systematic Review Approach to Help Train Social Workers in Dealing with Involuntary Clients

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Abstract

Social workers who deal with involuntary clients face lot of challenges with regards to dealing with reluctant or resistant individuals. The education and training of such social workers, specifically with respect to techniques to deal with involuntary clients, can make them more effective at their job. A systematic review protocol was designed and implemented to find articles that address techniques and methods of dealing with involuntary clients. Five articles derived from this search were analysed further. Analysis of these articles yielded some elements that can be used to design a dedicated curriculum for social workers to help them more effectively deal with involuntary clients on a regular basis.

Keywords: Social Workers, Involuntary Clients, Training

Introduction

A significant part of the social workers' jobs is dealing with clients who do not want to be there as they have not sought therapy voluntarily. These clients, also known as involuntary clients, can often present a complex challenge to the social workers tasked with their care and wellbeing.

Many experienced social workers have developed skills and techniques to help them cope with the challenges of involuntary clients. They have found methods to engage the clients and make them open to the treatment options being presented to them. It is important that these tools development by social workers with real world experience become a means of teaching for those social workers that are presently in training.

A systematic review of available literature was conducted to see what techniques, skills, strategies and methods have been developed by social workers in dealing with involuntary clients. A search methodology was developed and implemented to help narrow down the research works that were examined as part of the systematic review. The selected research works were subjected to further analysis to help understand the experiences of the social workers. Finally, a set of essential elements that can form the basis of the education and training of future social workers on how to deal with involuntary clients was devised on the basis of the systematic review. These steps will be elaborated upon and presented in the following paper.

Involuntary Clients

Explained in brief, an involuntary client is one that is working with a social worker against their wishes. Involuntary clients may be visiting with a social worker due to many factors. These range from pressure from family members, being mandated by a legal agreement or a court order to visit a social worker or being required by law-enforcement or other government agencies to seek the assistance of a social worker. Involuntary clients are also sometimes called mandated clients. (Trotter C. , 1997)

Search Methodology

As stated previously, the aim of this review is to find research papers that outline the experiences of social workers with regard to the strategies and techniques they use to deal with involuntary clients.

With this goal in mind, search terms were formulated that would have the best chance of success in finding relevant works. The search phrases are listed below.

- "Involuntary clients + social workers"
- "How do social workers deal with involuntary clients"
- "Techniques + social workers + involuntary clients"
- "Strategies + social workers + involuntary clients"
- "Methods + social workers + involuntary clients"
- "Experiences + social workers + involuntary clients"

These search terms were input into the search engine Google Scholar to uncover the widest possible list of results. Google Scholar allows the searcher to automatically filter out any results that are not scholarly works. Thus only results of scholarly works were used to complete the search process.

Each page of results had a total of ten results. Since there were many relevant results, only those visible until page three of each of the above search terms was used. Thus a total of 150 results were initially considered. It is also important to note that many of the papers overlapped over the different search terms. Moreover, many of the papers appeared multiple times in the results of the same search terms as the papers were available in different digital libraries.

Using these methodology as well as narrowing down on the basis of relevance to the original review topic of methods used by social workers in dealing with involuntary clients, a total five papers were chosen to be studied further. These results are outlined in the following section.

Search Results and Description

In this section, the five research works that were shortlisted through the above-described methodology are gone into in further detail. Each of the results is mentioned below with relevant details as well as more description regarding the work's results with regard to techniques or methods social workers found useful in dealing with involuntary clients.

The first work studied was that of Kay Goler Levin's, entitled 'Involuntary clients are different: Strategies for group engagement using individual relational theories in synergy with group development theories'. The aim of this work was to determine strategies in dealing with involuntary clients, specifically from the point of view of using group engagement. Levin contends that for a therapy group to be deemed effective, the aspect of the group is central to its success and thus, this is the same with any group comprised of involuntary clients. Moreover, according to Levin, this is an aspect that has been overlooked when it comes to research work involving dealing with involuntary clients. The author's aim, thus, is to correct this gap in the research literature. In order to achieve this, the author used individual relational theories in the context of involuntary clients. Those were studied alongside theories that have been focused on group engagement. Levin's supposition is that when it comes to dealing with involuntary clients, using group work or group therapy can be a successful strategy. According to Levin, the relational aspects involved in group dynamics offer an alternative different method to engage

involuntary clients. Levin also found that the group leader played an important role in determining group dynamics for involuntary clients. The group leader's ability to absorb the anger or reluctance of the involuntary clients enabled their further engagement in the group therapy. (Levin, 2006)

One of the most quoted works in the field of engaging with involuntary clients is the second work that was studied, entitled "Working with mandated clients: A pro-social approach" by author Christopher Trotter. As implied in the title, Trotter's approach for dealing with involuntary clients is rooted in a pro-social approach. Trotter outlines what he considers a pro-social approach – which includes modelling what can be considered ideal or desirable behaviour, as well as challenging or preventing undesirable or unwanted behaviour from occurring in the client. Therefore, encouraging desirable behaviour and discouraging undesirable behaviour is considered by the author as a pro-social approach. As a means of addressing this issue, Trotter uses the example of a study conducted Victoria in Australia which showed that the use of a pro-social approach in the area of corrections and dealing with involuntary clients that are criminals, reduced the risk of recidivism or recurrence of criminal activity by around 30-50%. The study showed that the pro-social approach was combined with teaching other relevant skills was responsible for this reduction. Trotter argued in his work that other studies conducted in contexts have also proven a similar point with regard or involuntary or mandated clients and taking a pro-social approach. The author's overall argument is that using a system of rewards to enable pro-social behaviour and discourage anti-social behaviour needs to be a key skill for any social workers that seek to engage with and regularly work with involuntary clients. (Trotter, 1997)

The third work is by author Courtney A. Jacobsen's entitled 'Social Workers Reflect on Engagement with Involuntary Clients'. In this work, the authors focus is on the social workers themselves. She endeavours to understand the experience of those social workers who work regularly with involuntary clients, by interviewing five social workers. Jacobsen's focus further narrows to the issue of client engagement. Typically, due to the fact that involuntary clients are often meeting with the social worker against their volition, they are generally uncooperative or belligerent about being there. Thus, social workers often have trouble getting the involuntary client to involve themselves in an active manner with the social worker and the treatment or therapeutic plan offered to them. This process can be termed as engagement – which is difficult for social workers to achieve due to the reluctance and resistance of the involuntary clients. Jacobsen posits that engagement is often the first step towards dealing with involuntary clients. Through the interviews, the author found that as per the experiences of the social workers, affording the client some control and the ability to make choices was often one of the key ways to getting them to engage with the process. The social workers also stated that motivational interviewing and relational approaches were also strategies that they had used with success to get involuntary clients to engage. (Jacobsen, 2013)

Ronald H Rooney's work "Socialization strategies for involuntary clients" is also cited often in the area of research on involuntary clients. The author's central hypothesis is that by using reactance theory, guidelines for the socialization of involuntary clients and other means of dealing with them can be found. In order to explain his theory, Rooney expands on reactance theory, which states that people tend to oppose or challenge any actions that may cause their options or choices to be restricted or removed altogether. In short, a person who feels forced or pressured to do something due to their choices being taken away from them may react in the opposite way intended and may actually end up being defiant or reactionary. Rooney applied this

to understanding involuntary clients, who are meeting with the social worker against their own choice, i.e. involuntarily. According to Rooney, reactance theory may be the key to predicting the response of an involuntary client. Rooney goes further in stating that reactance theory has the potential to be used to create a model for social workers that can enable them to effectively engage with an involuntary client. The author believes that when an involuntary client is socialized, he or she is less likely to react negatively to the intervention of the social worker. Further, Rooney contends that socialization also adds invaluable to the involuntary client's ability to make his or her own decisions in areas that do not fall under the mandate of a court order. Rooney described how socialization occurs using a two-step or two-phase approach. The first phase is worker preparation and the second phase is the conducting of socialization sessions. (Rooney, 1988)

The fifth and final document that was examined as part of the systematic review is not a research article, but rather a 'good practice guide' that lays out strategies to deal with involuntary clients. Entitled "Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work – Good Practice Guide", the guide has been published by The University of Edinburgh. The guide is the result of reviews of existing research on user engagement in social work, seminars conducted with 70 professionals working in local social work departments in Scotland and practitioner-led research projects in local authorities in Scotland. Overall, the work done by the University showed that the relationship between the social worker and the involuntary client is central to engagement, that working face-to-face and working with the involuntary client is integral to solve their problems, that it is important to develop trust and respect with the involuntary client, especially to enable engagement, that open and honest communications are important, and that the involuntary client may need active support and advocacy to help them engage with the process and to make decisions. The guidebook also outlines some strategies that may help the social worker, including taking time and patience to build trust, being professional in the face of challenging behaviour, getting peer support from senior and other colleagues in similar situations, using an evaluation process that enables the social worker to think critically and honestly about their work, and allowing the clients a process through which they can complain or provide feedback without facing repercussions. (University of Edinburgh)

Suggestions for Curriculum Design

The aim of this systematic review is to provide some suggestions that may aid in the design of a specific curriculum that can be used to train social workers to help them deal better with involuntary clients. In this section, a set of essential elements that can form the basis of the education and training of future social worker will be gleaned on the basis of the five works that were studied.

One essential element that social workers would need to be trained about emerged from the different theories and approaches that were studied in relation to dealing with involuntary clients. Examples from the analysed studies include the 'pro-social' approach and 'reactance theory'. These examples show that one element that will need to be taken into consideration when designing a curriculum will be creating a strong theoretical underpinning. Social workers can only benefit from understanding relevant literature, as well as sociological, psychological and medical theories that may impact their interactions with involuntary clients.

Another important element that needs to become part of the training of social workers is the importance of groups. This comes out in two ways. One, groups are an important means of therapy for involuntary clients, as evidenced by one of the research papers analysed in the systematic review. Therefore, social workers need to be trained in conducting group therapy, learning the importance of group dynamics and understanding how best to help their clients in a group setting. Two, groups are also an important factor of social workers' engagement with each other, especially with regards to exchanging ideas, transmitting best practices and seeking comfort and reassurance from peers on the challenges of dealing with involuntary clients. It is important that social workers are trained in this form of peer support to not only enable them to have a way of dealing with the real impediments to doing a tough job, but also as a means of having the workers speak to each other on a regular basis to learn from peers as to successful techniques in interfacing with involuntary clients.

Social workers' training must also include ways of inducing the involuntary clients to become engaged and participate fully in the process. This is, in particular, a challenge faced by social workers dealing with involuntary or mandated clients. As explained by the researchers, due to the factor of choice being taken away from them, the involuntary clients may be more reluctant to even begin the process of dealing with their issues by refusing to engage. Therefore, techniques in getting the involuntary clients to engage with their treatment is essential for social workers.

For all of the above, communication skills are vital. Social workers require additional training in communication skills, with a particular focus on communicating with individuals who may be resistant, angry, reluctant or otherwise indisposed towards participating fully.

In order to work with involuntary clients, it is also important that social workers receive training to understand when their help is being received by the client, and when the client is not taking the process well. Training to help the social worker discern whether they are helping or harming the client is important as an angry or belligerent client may even become abusive or violent. Social workers must be trained to spot warning signs of such behaviour.

Social workers also need to understand the legal ramifications of dealing with mandated clients so that they are fully aware of their responsibility to not only the client but also to any court or law enforcement system that requires the client to seek the intervention of a social worker.

In conclusion, there are several elements that can be used to design a curriculum to train social workers to specifically and effectively deal with involuntary clients. However, it is important to note that there does not seem to be adequate research on this subject. It is extremely important to address this gap in scholarly works in order to move forward with designing a curriculum. It will be necessary to study existing education and training provided to social workers to examine what, if any, material exists to deal with involuntary clients. Once this is understood more clearly, the next step of using the above listed elements, and more, to design a customised curriculum can take place.

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