

Successful Strategies for Working with Involuntary Clients: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Dealing with involuntary clients is a challenging aspect of the work of social workers. A systematic review was conducted of available literature on the successful strategies for working with involuntary clients. A search methodology was devised, designed to be conducted to specially constructed search terms on the Google Scholar search engine in order to gain the maximum possible number of results. The resultant hits were then narrowed down using criteria, including the thematic focus of this systematic review. It was found that while overall there was a reasonable number of works conducted on the topic, there was still a lot more work that could be done on this topic, including comparing and contrasting existing results, as well as focusing more on different geographies, socio-economic, political and societal contexts.

Keywords: Involuntary Clients, Strategy, Social Worker, Social Work

Introduction

Dealing with involuntary clients is an important and often difficult part of a social worker's day-to-day work. It is a task that brings with it a set of challenges that each individual social worker must overcome. However, there is a fair amount of pertinent research that has been conducted in this field in order to ascertain the challenges and opportunities in working with involuntary clients. Moreover, several experts and researchers have endeavoured to put together a series of strategies for social workers that can be successful in dealing with involuntary clients.

This paper is a systematic review that has been conducted on available literature on the theme of 'successful strategies for working with involuntary clients'. In order to conduct a systematic review, a search was devised and conducted. The methodology for this search has been clearly outlined in the following paper. A selected number of research papers and books were further studied. A brief description, including aim of the research paper, methodologies of research and overall results of the research, has been outlined for each of the selected papers. Finally, some important trends, themes and observations were teased out with intent towards making recommendations for future research.

Who are involuntary clients?

In order to proceed, it is important to have an understanding of whom exactly involuntary clients are. Broadly speaking, an involuntary client can be said to be a person who is has been forced, either by a person, family, society, law enforcement or circumstances, to seek professional help.

Rooney (1992) delineated two kinds of involuntary clients – Mandated Clients and Nonvoluntary Clients.. According to Rooney (1992), a Mandated Client is one that has been forced to seek the help of a professional due to a legal mandate such as an order from a judge or court. Meanwhile, a Nonvoluntary Client can be said to have been forced to seek professional help due to a variety of circumstances. He or she could have received directives from a welfare agency, employer, family members, etc.

Overall, social workers must deal with clients who are not there of their own volition when dealing with involuntary clients, creating a set of unique challenges and opportunities.

The aim of this review is to find and analyse research works that focus on one particular aspect of working with involuntary clients – that of successful strategies that have been employed in dealing with such clients.

Methodology

The first step in conducting a systematic review is creating a methodology to search and narrow down the search of the results. Such a methodology was devised keeping in mind a number of factors, including the thematic topic at the core of this systematic review, practical considerations such as time and scope of this article, and the best avenues to search for scholarly works on the chosen subject.

As a first step to the methodology, relevant search terms, based on the thematic topic of this systematic review, were devised. These search terms are as follows:

- Successful strategies for dealing with involuntary clients
- Strategies for involuntary clients
- Strategies for dealing with involuntary clients
- Dealing with involuntary clients
- How to deal effectively with involuntary clients

These search terms were input into the search engine Google Scholar, which searches the open web for scholarly articles. This search engine was chosen due to two benefits that it brings. One, it searches all digital databases that contain research works, rather than the searcher having to individually search each database (for example, JSTOR or Researchgate). Two, it automatically filters out any non-scholarly search results to the search terms. Therefore, the searcher would not have to spend any time sifting through magazine or newspaper articles, videos or blog posts that contain the search topic; only relevant scholarly works would show up using the Google Scholar search engine.

Another level of filtration was required as part of the search methodology. Once the search terms were entered, a number of results showed up. Due to the vast amount of work having been conducted on the thematic topic of this systematic review, it was decided that no results past the 3rd page of results would be considered. Each of the pages contained 10 results. This decision was made due to the narrow scope of this article, which permits no more than 5-7 articles to be reviewed. Of the 30 results, five were chosen to be further analysed due to their relevance and topicality.

Results

As described in the previous section, a search methodology was devised and executed in order to find relevant articles to the thematic topic of this systematic review, “successful strategies for working with involuntary clients”. Five articles were chosen to be further studied. These research works are outlined below with relevant details on each of them. After the descriptions of these works, overall trends and observations are outlined.

1. Author Kay Goler Levin’s research work titled ‘Involuntary clients are different: Strategies for group engagement using individual relational theories in synergy with group development theories’ deals with the specific aspect of using group engagement for dealing with involuntary clients. According to the author, group process is a central aspect of any successful group that is intended to be a therapeutic one. However, Levin points out that one shortfall has been that prior research on group dynamics has been conducted with voluntary clients or persons and there has not been any substantive work on the impact of involuntary clients in group work. Therefore, Levin’s study focuses on the use of individual relational theories, specifically with involuntary clients and studied in concert with theories centred on the issue of group engagement. Levin contends that group work can be an effective practice for dealing with involuntary clients. The author states that the relational aspects of working and interacting in a group are different means

for engaging involuntary clients. The author uses theories on individuals and groups to build a conceptual model for an effective means of engaging with involuntary clients. One important result that Levin found through the research was that in any group involved with involuntary members, the leader of the group was a key member. The group leader's acceptance of the anger experienced by the involuntary clients in their group was a key aspect of the group's interaction and acted as an entry to further engagement from the involuntary clients. (Levin, 2006)

2. Author Courtney A. Jacobsen's work titled 'Social Workers Reflect on Engagement with Involuntary Clients' was studied next. Jacobsen specifically focuses on the experience of the social workers by speaking with five different social workers. In particular, she focuses on one aspect of working with involuntary clients: engagement. Engagement can be described as the process of getting an involuntary client to become actively involved with the social worker and with his or her treatment. According to Jacobsen, as involuntary clients are there with the social worker against their wishes, they are most often reluctant, or even resistant to any form of treatment. Therefore, the first step in dealing with them for the social worker is getting them engaged. Through interviews with five different social workers, Jacobsen aims with the study to examine the process of engagement and understanding the work of the social workers in getting involuntary clients to engage. The social workers that were interviewed placed a high importance in giving the clients some measure of choice and control as a means of getting them engaged. Apart from this, they outlined other successful strategies as well, such as motivational interviewing and relational approaches. Jacobsen adds that the latter view is supported by other research as well. (Jacobsen, 2013)
3. Authors Wing Hong Chui and Kit Mui Ho centred their work on Hong Kong in their work entitled, 'Working with involuntary clients: perceptions and experiences of outreach social workers in Hong Kong'. This work centres around social workers dealing with reluctant youth in the context of Hong Kong. According to the authors, outreach social workers may play a major role in seeking out youth who may need their services and engaging them. However, the recipients of these efforts, i.e. the young people themselves, are often involuntary clients. The authors believe that little research has been done to note what strategies and techniques have proven effective to deal with the reluctance of their clients in this specific setting; therefore, the authors set out to work further on this subject. The authors not only aim to better understand the resistance of the youth in engaging with the outreach social workers, but also how the workers respond to this reluctance. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with the social workers in order to ascertain their views on the subject and found that the workers believed that patience, sensitivity and building a rapport with the involuntary clients were key to effectively dealing with the involuntary clients. (Chui & Ho, 2006)
4. An anthology work by authors Mark Smith, Michael Gallagher, Helen Wosu, Jane Stewart, Vivien E. Cree, Scott Hunter, Sam Evans, Catherine Montgomery, Sarah Holiday, and Heather Wilkinson, was entitled 'Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work: Findings from a Knowledge Exchange Project'. A review of findings from a knowledge exchange project by multiple authors, this work uses the provision of social work services in the United Kingdom to actually outline several policy shortfalls. In particular, the authors contend that policy injunctions have masked the lack of clarity on important terms such as participation and engagement. Going further to talk about involuntary clients, the authors state that since the clients are engaging against their will, expecting them to become involved in the planning and provision of social work services results in tensions. The knowledge exchange mentioned above was conducted between academics and local social workers in the United Kingdom. According to the findings, the 'roll out' of the United Kingdom's user engagement agenda actually highlights a problem of the government's provision of social services. While it is ostensibly about exchanging relevant knowledge on dealing with involuntary clients, the work functions, in essence, as an indictment of the present policy environment in the United Kingdom. (Smith, et al., 2012)

5. A research work by author Christine J Schimmel was entitled 'When Leaders Are Challenged: Dealing with Involuntary Members in Groups'. In this work, author Schimmel contends that leading groups which are comprised of involuntary members can be incredibly difficult due to the negativity of the involuntary clients. Moreover, this negativity can create additional dynamics that the group leader must deal with as part of his or her strategy of helping the members of the group. Schimmel outlines specific skills that the group leader needs to possess as well as some strategies that may help the leader deal with three different types of groups where involuntary clients are members. Schimmel describes three types of group dynamics determined by the composition with regards to involuntary clients as members. One, a group can be entire comprised of involuntary clients. Two, a group where some, but not all, members are involuntary clients. And finally, three, a group that has open memberships and that is already in progress, which involuntary clients join. Schimmel states that skills needed by the group leader are the usage of creative and multi-sensory interventions with the primary aim being ensuring the active engagement of the involuntary clients in the work and processes of the group. (Schimmel, 2011)

Discussion and Conclusion

Below is a discussion of some key observations that were evident from the conducting of the systematic review.

- Two out of the five articles dealt with group dynamics.
- The fourth work analysed seemed at the outset to be about exchanging best practices for dealing with involuntary clients but functioned more as a criticism of the present policy environment for social work and the dealing of social workers with involuntary clients, in the specific geographic setting of the United Kingdom. As such, it did not contribute significantly to the systematic review and the understanding of strategies to deal with involuntary clients.
- Two of the five articles had a geographic focus. One was in Hong Kong and the other, as mentioned above, was the United Kingdom.
- Of the articles dealing with group work, both mentioned the importance of the group leader. In the first article analysed, the author found that the group leader's acceptance of the natural negative emotion and anger experienced by the involuntary clients was key to further engagement from those clients. In the fifth and final article analysed, the group leader's engagement with the involuntary clients was the subject of the research and the author found that the leader needed skills and techniques to deal with the involuntary clients in a group due to the added level of difficulty of leading a group with some and possibly all involuntary clients.
- The second work dealt with techniques for specific aspects of dealing with involuntary clients, i.e. getting them to engage in the process. As the clients were there reluctantly or against their will, the author stated that the first battle faced by the social worker is getting the client to actively engage with the process of their own treatment. She outlined strategies that dealt with this specific aspect of dealing with involuntary clients.

One limitation is that all the articles were from the point of view of the social workers due to the design of the search terms and the focus of this article. There are likely research works conducted on the point of view and experiences of the involuntary clients as well in these situations, but those fell outside the scope of this article. Moreover, the article was also hampered by the fact that due to the narrow size and scope of the article, only a few results were analysed and further shortlisted. Given broader scope and greater size of article, it is likely that more results could have been considered as well.

While there is a fair amount of literature on the topic of this systematic review, it does still fall short of exploring the entire subject in depth, as well as in various contexts. For example, there is little work on the difference in dealing with mandated clients versus non-voluntary clients. This is to say, there has not been much effort to compare and contrast the strategies in dealing with these two different types of involuntary clients. Moreover, there has not been adequate exploration of the different geographic, socio-

economic, political and societal contexts and how they may influence strategies to deal with involuntary clients. It is likely that each of these above-mentioned factors will likely impact how social workers deal with involuntary clients and more work needs to be done to illuminate best practices that are influenced by those factors.

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