

Perceptions of support-seeking in young people attending a Youth Offending Team: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

*Clinical Child Psychology
and Psychiatry*

2014, Vol 19(1) 7–23

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DOI: 10.1177/1359104512465739

ccp.sagepub.com



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Abstract

High levels of mental health problems have been identified in young people who have offended (committed/been convicted of a criminal offence). However, as with many young people, they tend not to seek support for their difficulties. This research aimed to explore support-seeking in this population by asking ‘What are the perceptions of support-seeking in young people attending a Youth Offending Team?’ Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six males (aged 13–18) and the transcripts were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four master themes were revealed: Youth Offending Team attendance prompting reflection, Damaged self, Complexity of relationships and Internal conflicts. Generally participants perceived support-seeking as beneficial, but various barriers meant that they did not tend to view it as a viable coping strategy for themselves. Interventions aimed at addressing these barriers may help young people who have offended to seek support.

Keywords

Support-seeking, young offenders, qualitative

Introduction

Mental health difficulties in young people who have offended

Young people who have offended (have committed/been convicted of a criminal offence) are up to three times more likely to have a mental health problem than the general population, with reported rates varying from 25% to 81% (Leon, 2002). These difficulties include anger, emotional disorders, conduct disorder and substance misuse (Health and Social Care Advisory Service, 2008). Chitsabesan et al. (2006) found that almost 1 in 5 young people who had offended had significant

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depressive symptoms, 1 in 10 had anxiety or post-traumatic stress symptoms and 1 in 10 reported having self-harmed within the last month.

Despite the high levels of need, practice-based evidence suggests that young people who have offended often do not seek support for their difficulties, and research into the area is limited. Paton, Crouch, and Camic (2009) suggested that accessing and accepting support was difficult for young people who have offended, with many of them distancing themselves from needing support. Naylor, Lincoln, and Goddard (2008) highlighted a 'widespread resistance to referral' (p. 283) among those attending a specialist mental health service for young people who had offended. Not wanting to talk to a stranger about personal issues, feeling labelled, and anxiety caused by not understanding the process were identified as barriers to engaging with mental health services. Woodall (2007) found that a minority of young males in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) identified peer support as valuable, but the majority felt unable to seek support from peers due to the masculine ethos of the environment. A further study of young people in custody highlighted stigma of mental health problems, lack of insight and lack of knowledge regarding treatment as barriers to treatment for psychological difficulties (Shelton, 2004).

Naylor et al. (2008) have suggested that factors such as practitioners being respectful and committed, flexibility of the service, clinical effectiveness, personal relevance, and explanation and clarity of the service may encourage a young person who has offended to seek support from services.

Youth Offending Teams

Although resistant to seeking support, most young people who have been convicted of a criminal offence will either have a legal obligation to attend a Youth Offending Team (YOT) or will be in custody in a YOI. YOTs were established under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, with the primary aim of deterring and preventing young people from re-offending. The support provided by YOTs involves addressing the factors that have led to the young person offending, which entails tackling risk factors and strengthening protective factors. This includes support regarding education or employment, social activities and housing, working with families, and also interventions relating to drug and alcohol use. It is a requirement of the Act that at least one member of the YOT staff team should be a healthcare professional, and very often in practice the remit of this healthcare professional is the provision of a mental health service (Health and Social Care Advisory Service, 2008). Although legally obliged to attend a YOT, there is evidence from research and practice that these young people often do not fully engage with the support services these teams provide. The phrase 'psychologically engaged' has been suggested, to distinguish from what might be considered superficial engagement, and is described as 'motivated to a degree that their attention is absorbed in the tasks and challenges in an activity' (Dawes & Larson, 2011, p. 259).

Support-seeking in the general population of young people

Research into support-seeking in the general population of young people is vast. Many factors have been found to influence whether or not a young person seeks support for their difficulties, including: gender (Farrand, Parker, & Lee, 2007), age (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), locus of control (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996), stigma surrounding mental health problems (Fortune, Sinclair, & Hawton, 2008), the nature of the difficulty (Farrand et al.), emotional competence (Ciarrochi, Deane, & Rickwood, 2002) and confidence that other people or services would be able to help (Lambourn, 2009; Wright et al., 2005). Fears relating to a lack of trust and concerns regarding confidentiality have also been highlighted as barriers to support-seeking in young people

(Fortune et al.; Roose & John, 2003). This applies not only to support-seeking from professionals, but also from friends (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005).

A disparity has been found in which young people are more likely to adopt a 'cope alone' strategy for themselves than to recommend this approach for others (Lambourn, 2009; Raviv, Sills, Raviv, & Wilansky, 2000). It is commonly suggested that this may relate to the 'threat to self' hypothesis, whereby in order to seek help an individual must acknowledge a vulnerability, which poses a threat to their sense of self. The psychological costs of help-seeking, the 'threat to self', are therefore thought to outweigh the benefits, which impedes support-seeking for the self, but not when recommending this coping strategy to others (Raviv et al.).

Current study

Young people who have offended are at risk of having mental health and emotional problems for which they do not appear to seek support, and support-seeking in this population is not well understood. This is despite the fact that through YOTs and YOIs this population has contact with professionals who are likely to be able to provide them with help and support.

Previous research into support-seeking in the general population of young people has tended to use quantitative methods and has been criticised for utilising hypothetical scenarios, rather than focusing on real life experiences (Murray, 2005). There is an absence of any qualitative research relating to support-seeking in young people who have offended. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research carried out with young people attending YOTs in the UK.

Qualitative approach

The aim of this study was to add a qualitative perspective to a growing body of literature around the area of young people attending YOTs. The research asked:

What are the perceptions of support-seeking in young people attending a Youth Offending Team?

Qualitative approaches are concerned with how people experience events, attribute meaning to these events and make sense of the world (Willig, 2008). Utilising this approach allowed a rich, in-depth exploration of the individual perspectives of the participants. This was essential, since this research question focused on personal meaning-making. This also allowed the research to be participant-led rather than researcher-led, which was considered important given the issues of power identified in the literature in relation to young people. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used for data collection and analysis because the assumptions guiding this particular approach were deemed to fit best with the assumptions guiding the research: that through experiences of support-seeking, either personal or observed in others, young people develop perceptions of support-seeking, which influence their behaviour. It was further assumed that each person's perceptions are real to them and can be indirectly accessed to some degree through the interpretation of language and verbal accounts.

Given the assumption of this research that perceptions are linked to actions, it was considered that the perceptions held by participants about support-seeking would relate to support-seeking behaviour. Therefore it was hoped that this study would contribute to both an understanding of perceptions of support-seeking and an understanding of support-seeking behaviours in young people who have offended. It was hoped that this might help to inform the development of support services for young people who have offended, particularly mental health and wellbeing provision in clinical practice.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling, whereby selection is based on criteria relevant to the research question (Willig, 2001), was used to recruit participants from a city-based YOT. YOT officers were asked to identify potential participants who would fit the inclusion criteria (consensus that the young person was not likely to find the interview process distressing, was deemed by the YOT to pose a low risk to the researcher and was aged between 12 and 17). All potential participants were given information regarding the research by their YOT officer.

Eleven young people were initially interested in taking part in the research, and for various reasons six participants were finally recruited. These participants were contacted by phone to discuss the research, to answer any questions they had and to arrange interviews for times that were mutually convenient and in keeping with the risk assessment. (See Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics).

Procedure

Interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix One) was constructed in line with qualitative guidelines (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Individual interviews lasting between 40 and 70 minutes were conducted with each participant at the YOT base. Measures were taken to help participants to feel relaxed, to facilitate rapport and to address the power imbalance between participants and researcher as far as possible: interviews were carried out at a location familiar to the participants, and drinks were provided. Additionally, the researcher made it clear that no questions were designed to mislead participants, and that there were no right or wrong answers. The researcher took the participants' lead and demonstrated an interest in what they had to say. At the end of each interview participants were given a restaurant voucher as thanks for their participation in the study. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis. The transcripts were analysed by IPA using the procedure recommended by Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999), with the researcher treating each transcript as an individual, and bracketing ideas that had emerged from previous transcripts while analysing the next. First, the transcript was read closely several times and initial notes were made regarding anything of interest,

Table 1. Summary of participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Input from YOT clinical psychologist?
Anton	Male	18*	Black Caribbean	No
Peter	Male	13	White British	No
Jonathon	Male	16	Black Caribbean	No
Malachi	Male	17	Black Caribbean	No
Mohammed	Male	15	White/Black African	Assessment only
Sam	Male	17	Mixed White/Black Caribbean	Yes

*Anton had just turned 18 at the time of the interview, but was still engaged with the YOT.

with a particular focus on content, language, and patterns or contradictions. The transcript was then re-read to identify emerging themes, which encapsulated the participants' words and the researcher's initial interpretations. Emerging themes were examined for connections to produce a number of subthemes and super-ordinate themes.

Once each of the transcripts had been analysed in this way, the researcher looked for connections across the subthemes and super-ordinate themes of each transcript, to cluster into master themes. Themes that were not well supported or well represented in the data were not included in the final master theme table.

Credibility of the study. This research was conducted in accordance with established guidelines for carrying out qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Smith et al., 2009; Turpin et al., 1997; Yardley, 2000) in order to ensure that this research and the interpretations made were as transparent and valid as possible. Furthermore, a number of audits were conducted on sections of the transcripts by several of the authors who were more independent from the data collection process.

Ethical issues. Ethical approval was sought and gained from a local ethics committee and from the manager of the YOT in line with their organisational policy. Informed consent was gained from all participants. When participants were younger than 16 years old, informed consent was gained from their parent/guardian and assent from the participant.

Various measures were taken to ensure the wellbeing of the participants, including ensuring as far as possible that each participant understood the research and the interview process. Measures were taken to make the interviews as relaxed as possible and to facilitate rapport between participants and the researcher. Each participant's YOT officer was made aware of the fact that the young person they were working with was participating in the research. At the end of each interview the researcher gave the participants a debrief sheet, checked how they were feeling and asked about the experience of being interviewed.

Results

The data yielded some commonalities, which were grouped under four master themes: Youth Offending Team attendance prompting reflection, Damaged self, Complexity of relationships and Internal conflicts (see Appendix Two for theme table). The themes and relationships between them are represented pictorially in Figure 1.

Youth Offending Team attendance prompting reflection

All participants made reference to temporal factors. It seemed that their YOT involvement had created a space to reflect on these issues:

it made me think about all the previous things I did and what I'm doing now, where I wanna be in the future
(Jonathon)

As they looked back at their journeys, a prominent feeling of regret came to the fore, particularly relating to past crimes. Participants seemed to be reasoning about their actions, often linking this to the influence of others and their own identity at the time. When talking about the present, participants often focused on their experiences with the YOT, seeming to perceive their YOT

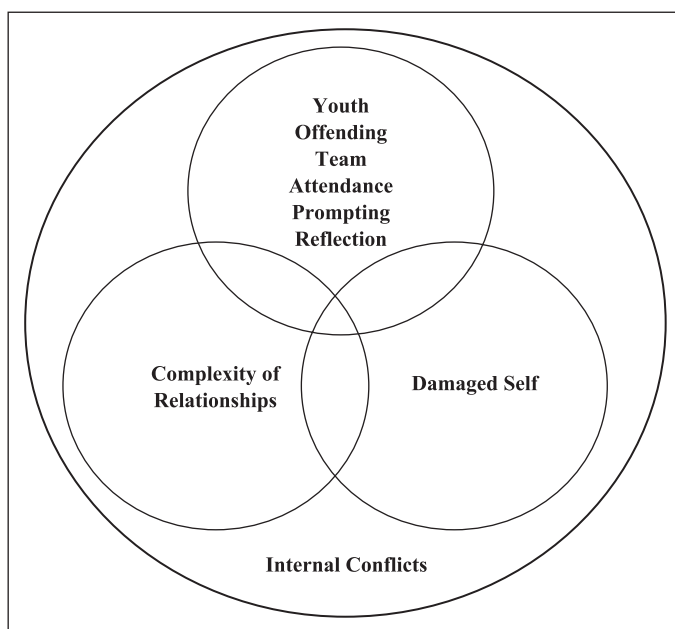


Figure 1. Schematic representation of themes.

involvement as a consequence of their past actions. They did not see the YOT as an opportunity to gain additional support but rather as something that they had to tolerate until it was over. Hopes and aspirations were expressed for a future that was different, and in some way better, compared with the past. Participants anticipated that this future would be difficult to achieve, due to personal and external factors that they thought might limit their opportunities.

Damaged self

Reflecting over time seemed to have influenced participants' development of ideas about their sense of self. Most of the participants tended to use mainly factual language to describe their experiences, which suggested a difficulty in relating to their emotions. Participants struggled to express themselves, marked in their speech by hesitations and comments that they didn't know or couldn't explain:

if he can do it to one person, so, or, really and truly, like, that's all, I can't explain it (Anton)

Participants used various methods to distance themselves from their emotions: minimising, focusing on the positive side of a situation and talking in the second person. When participants did talk about emotions, again they struggled to explain and were often hesitant:

it was upsetting, like, but, I don't really know how to say it, um (Jonathon)

When participants talked about managing their feelings there was a theme of 'opening up' versus keeping emotions hidden or 'bottled up'. Many participants suggested that it was good to talk about feelings, or this was implied by the way they talked about encouraging others to talk about their feelings:

she tried to keep her emotions bottled up, and tried not to tell anyone but I just told her she can talk to me about anything...so I told her like whenever she wants she can talk to me about anything (Jonathon)

However, when it came to themselves, participants appeared to struggle with talking about how they felt, and their stance on this was often contradictory throughout the interview:

I can speak to [YOT officer] about these things, the other person that works with me and my family, my cousins, I can speak to them about my feelings and that, but at the moment there's no need you know (Mohammed)

Participants appeared to have a sense of themselves as powerless, which was expressed in various ways. Despite this, all participants indicated a strong sense of agency regarding their crimes:

no-one could really force me to do anything, so, at the end of the day it's my fault (Jonathon)

However, when talking about not re-offending, it seemed that participants often demonstrated a lack of self-efficacy, for example in this quote, where a positive outcome is attributed to the YOT and a negative outcome to the young person:

You'll look back and you'll realise that, YOT has helped you, if you don't re-offend. But if you go out and re-offend it kind of looks like that YOT has failed when really they haven't failed it's the young person that's failed (Sam)

A sense of themselves as powerless was also expressed through the way participants spoke of a lack of options or choices, which was associated with a feeling of pressure in many aspects of their lives: the YOT, the judicial system and their lives more broadly:

he wanted me to pay it back as soon as possible...I didn't wanna get myself in trouble I didn't know what he was going to do if I didn't pay him...so I just tried to get the money as soon as possible...if you don't want your mum to know and you're not working, like, this is, like, the only other choice really (Jonathon)

Participants often expressed shame when reflecting on their pasts, especially in relation to their crimes. Participants seemed to have ideas that people, including themselves, were defined by their actions, often labelling themselves or others as 'bad boys' (Anton). Several participants talked about times when they felt they had to portray a positive self to others, and for some this was a false self:

say you don't care and that, but you know, you say you don't care, you know you care innit (Anton)

It could be that this portrayal of the self as positive and/or false was at least in part associated with the way that participants related to their emotions. This could also potentially serve the function of managing others' perceptions of them. Throughout the interviews participants demonstrated beliefs that others would hold stigmatising or discriminatory perceptions of them due to their involvement with the YOT. Several participants made the link between these beliefs and the fears and concerns they had when looking to the future, which were highlighted previously:

if you read on paper what I've done you can easily make a judgement and say I'm this, I'm that...you're so used to being judged, on, on what you've done (Sam)

As already noted, the sense participants had of who they were seemed to have become defined by what they had done. This related not only to their own perceptions of their actions but also their imagined idea of other people's perceptions:

say I saw a nice girl, alright...I want to approach her, and one day she sees me do community service, but she got standards that, she don't want no-one, no criminal, she wants a guy who, like, into their books, wanna make something of their life, not, you get me, she ain't on this bad boys (Anton)

Complexity of relationships

The influence of others was often raised in a negative sense in relation to participants making sense of why they had committed their crimes:

say you're with a group and they're with a car with a window a little bit open and that, or something and they had a brand new phone out, all your mates would say oh smash the window, get a new phone or whatever, but then there's a part of you saying I don't wanna do it (Peter)

Participants also saw others as having a positive influence on them, particularly highlighting how friends, family, YOT workers, teachers and the YOT Clinical Psychologist had provided them with support. Participants described how friends and family provided emotional support and encouragement, often regarding continuing education or not re-offending:

They would say, um, what are you doing Peter, you're not gonna get a good job, and all that, and you're not gonna get a good life (Peter)

Participants who had seen the team Clinical Psychologist also talked about the YOT providing emotional support. In the main, however, YOT support was described in practical terms, such as helping the young person to apply for jobs or to access further education.

Most of the participants also talked about ways in which they had helped and supported others. This included providing emotional support, which was most often talked about in relation to females:

She'll [mother] calm down, when she sees that I'm doing well then start being happy again...gotta be good for myself I reckon, makes my mum happy innit (Malachi)

Participants talked about protecting others, which was generally related to the impact of their own actions and was associated with a feeling of responsibility for the other:

I don't ever wanna get myself in that trouble again...I never wanna have to upset my parents or family members again, even certain like, close friends, like, or even the girl that I was with at the time, I just don't wanna upset people basically (Jonathon)

When thinking about the impact of his actions on others Jonathon was acutely aware of the way he had affected the victim of his crime:

if you think of like, how the other people might feel, [inaudible] you know it's just not the right thing to do (Jonathon)

Generally participants demonstrated a difficulty in trusting others, which seemed to have a direct impact on their perceptions of seeking support for themselves. Often participants drew a distinction between family and friends in relation to trust:

I could trust them [friends] with them like lots of things, but not about like what happened to me and that, I couldn't...yeah I do trust my family, trust them all the time (Mohammed)

For many this lack of trust appeared to be based on previous experiences of having friendships in which someone had broken their trust, or had been influential in their becoming involved in criminal activity:

it's quite difficult to say no to friends that you think that are really your friends like cos you'd do anything for them kinda friends and then they get you involved in stuff like, that, then you realise they're not really your friends (Sam)

Several participants also identified that people would pretend to be their friends when they were not, which was related to a very strong sense of threat:

now it's a thing where do I trust that brear [person] or not? Could snake me behind my back any time of the day...sometimes they can be giving me a bad impression about them like they don't even really like me, but they're just acting like they're friends with me (Malachi)

All participants acknowledged that talking about problems might be helpful – generally speaking – but most of them felt that it wasn't something that they would/could do:

I don't really know, me personally yeah, I don't really think it helps, but some people do think talking helps, cos it helps you like, get things off your chest rather than keep it bottled in, like, people might be able to like understand or help you out somehow, support you, but like, me I just think, everyone has their own way of thinking, everyone has their own way of dealing with their problems, so like, some people would just like having a shoulder to cry on or someone to talk to all the time, but me, I wouldn't really mind, cos, I had the chance to talk to people, like to talk to my friends, my girlfriend, mum, or my YOT worker or anyone really, but, like, I just think to myself if I could do well from now on, then hopefully I won't really have a guilty conscience (Jonathon)

This quote also highlights a feature of many of the interviews, which was the way that the participants constructed the idea of a problem; often relating this to offending behaviour rather than considering other practical or emotional difficulties. It seemed that there was a sense among participants that their problems were not legitimate so didn't deserve support:

I don't really know why I keep my emotions to myself cos, I probably like, I know there must be people out there that's worse off than me, like, so, when I complain about all these things, they're probably not as bad as like other people's problems or as bad as I make them sound (Jonathon)

This might fit with the way participants seemed to feel labelled as 'bad'. Given the powerlessness and lack of self-efficacy that were expressed, it may have been that participants did not have confidence in their ability to seek support or make any positive changes even with support.

Other barriers to utilising social support to cope with difficulties included a reluctance to talk about themselves or their feelings, perceptions that talking about problems wouldn't change anything, and difficulties with trust:

I don't tell about those things, that's me personally, and like, I don't like, maybe with my family, but not like friends and stuff...I could trust them [friends], with like lots of things, but about what happened to me and that I couldn't (Mohammed)

Participants had highlighted that they could trust their families, but these were also the people that they identified as needing to be protected, so they might not have talked about their difficulties with them for fear of upsetting them. Participants also identified gender differences in relation to social support, and this seemed to be a further barrier to talking about problems:

I don't really sit down and talk, I think that's more of a girl thing...Like, er, I don't really gossip about my, my problems, it's not, I don't know, I don't see what's the point. Unless I'm talking to a girl or something (Malachi)

However, there were several things that participants identified that would make it more likely for them to seek social support for difficulties or concerns. For many of them this included understanding and empathy:

the people that I talk to, I could say are just my friends, cos like, they're my age, so they'll probably just kind of understand from my point of view what I was going through at the time (Jonathon)

Several participants raised the importance of having trust and it seemed that openness and honesty were important aspects of this trust:

My YOT worker I can trust, if, if I was to say something to him I can trust that if he said he's not gonna tell somebody then he won't tell them...he would say to me, um, if I think that it's something that's gonna endanger you or somebody else I have to tell, and then if I wanted to tell him I still could...but if he told me he wasn't going to tell other people...I know that he wouldn't say anything (Sam)

Internal conflicts

The theme of internal conflicts has no super-ordinate themes or subthemes, and permeates the other themes. The perceptions emphasised the most by participants have been presented throughout this section; however, there were contradictions within what participants said about almost every topic discussed. It seemed that this demonstrated a certain level of conflict and/or ambivalence in each of the participants. It is also possible that the perceptions of powerlessness and distrust expressed by many of the participants impacted on how they responded to being interviewed, despite attempts to address the power imbalance and to put them at ease.

This conflict is illustrated by the following quotes taken from throughout one transcript:

how can I sort my life out? Just, just, change it around a bit...

I don't really need nothing [pause] I'm actually alright (Malachi)

it's not like they're gonna talk to me and then I'm blatantly gonna stop [using cannabis]. I'll stop cos I wanna stop...

cannabis is the only thing they can help me with here (Malachi)

I wouldn't really sit down and chat with my friends...like sometimes I would, but not really (Malachi)

It also seemed that at times the conflict may have been a result of participants initially demonstrating some bravado and then possibly feeling more comfortable to admit more vulnerable feelings:

Really and truly I don't mind anyone seeing me...

I don't want girls to see me...you don't want people to see you like that (Anton)

In the quote below, Sam contradicted himself regarding how he will stay out of trouble, which may have been for some of the reasons given above, but may also have been due to a lack of confidence in his ability not to re-offend:

I think the YOT keeps me out of trouble...

my mind [stops from re-offending] (Sam)

It is possible that the participants were thinking about some of the subjects discussed for the first time as they verbalised them during the interview. These conflicts may therefore have been a result of participants not having thought through these topics enough to form a coherent narrative about them prior to being interviewed.

Discussion

The themes interpreted from the data suggest that overall participants appeared to perceive support-seeking as a coping strategy that was largely beneficial. However, while participants seemed to suggest that support-seeking would be helpful for other people, they generally did not perceive that it was something they could/would do. This is consistent with previous research (Ciarrochi et al., 2002; Lambourn, 2009; Raviv et al., 2000). It is suggested that the 'threat to self' hypothesis may account for this disparity, whereby seeking support involves a threat to the self as it requires the acknowledgement of vulnerability, which impedes support-seeking for the self, but not when recommending this strategy to others (Raviv et al.). In terms of the current research, it may also be helpful to consider the participants' other perceptions that arose during the analysis, which may shed further light on this disparity.

Participants' sense of themselves as powerless and 'bad' contributed to feelings of low self-efficacy and shame. It is possible that much of their identity related to being 'bad' or tough and feared. Given this, it is probable that they would be even less able to admit to the contradictory feelings of vulnerability, which may be important in terms of the 'threat to self' hypothesis. For many participants the term 'problem' was constructed as relating to offending behaviour. Murray's (2005) model of support-seeking in young people suggests that problems need to be legitimised prior to an individual seeking help for them. Murray links this to power and highlights the relatively powerless position of young people in society. Due to these participants' perceptions of themselves as powerless, it is possible that they are even less likely to see their difficulties as legitimate and therefore seek support. While not incorporated into Murray's model, it seems that perceptions of self may also be implicated in problem legitimisation, or at least the legitimisation that the individual with the problem deserves help with it.

Participants had little hope for an improved future. This appeared to stem partly from their lack of self-efficacy and also related to their perceptions of other people's views of them. It seems possible that participants' views of themselves as bad and powerless, coupled with the belief that others are critical and stigmatising towards them, may contribute to their perception that support-seeking is not a viable coping strategy for them. This suggestion is supported by research that has linked higher self-efficacy (Li & Yang, 2009) and an internal locus of control (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996) with support-seeking coping and findings

that people who perceive themselves as stigmatised are often unwilling to seek support (Williams & Mickelson, 2008).

Participants tended to see other people as untrustworthy, a perception supported by findings from similar research (Paton et al., 2009). It is possible that participants' perceptions of others as untrustworthy, coupled with ideas that family members, although trustworthy, need protection, would contribute to their perception that they could not seek support for their difficulties. Additionally, these particular beliefs may leave the participants with very limited perceived sources of support. Research suggests that with increasing age adolescents tend to turn to peers or rely on self-coping rather than accessing support from adults (Lambourn, 2009). It is possible that – due to the perception that other people, particularly peers, cannot be trusted – young people who have offended are even less likely than the general population of young people to trust and therefore seek support from peers. If this were the case (and taking into consideration the perceptions highlighted above), it is likely that these participants would be even more reliant on self-coping than their peers in the general population.

It was rare that emotional language was used when participants were talking about their experiences. In fact, strategies were often used to minimise or distance themselves from the emotional impact of these experiences. Given that emotional competence has been linked with support-seeking (Ciarrochi et al., 2002), it is possible that the preference for distancing from emotional talk contributed to participants' perceptions of support-seeking, at least in terms of emotional support-seeking.

This research also highlighted participants' perceptions regarding potential sources of support: friends, family, teachers and YOT workers. Participants' views regarding the factors that would enable them to engage in support-seeking related to characteristics of the support provider: understanding, empathic, trustworthy, open and honest. This is consistent with previous research that has highlighted similar qualities in the support giver (Roose & John, 2003).

It is worth considering these findings collectively, and attachment theory provides a possible framework to do this, particularly given the central role that attachment has been given in understanding support-seeking. Research has suggested that those with secure attachment styles are more likely to perceive support-seeking as useful and utilise this strategy than those with insecure attachments (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, as cited in Mortenson, 2009). While this research did not attempt to explore participants' attachment styles, some of the participants' perceptions can be seen as partially consistent with an insecure pattern of attachment, such as a lack of trust in others, poor self-image, low self-efficacy, and avoidance of emotion within the avoidant attachment style (Golding, 2008). This is not to suggest that these participants were necessarily insecure in their attachment styles, but they may have held some perceptions that are consistent with those held by people with insecure attachments.

Limitations

A potential limitation relates to the research that suggests a level of impairment in young offenders' expressive language abilities (Snow & Powell, 2005, 2008). Expressive language abilities were not assessed in these participants, but it is possible that this may have had some impact on their ability to translate their perceptions into a verbal account, which in IPA is relied upon to give an insight into perceptions (Willig, 2008). While this impact should be taken into account when viewing the findings from this research, it is likely that any difficulties would also impact on participants if they sought social support for their difficulties.

IPA research aims for homogeneity of the sample in terms of experience. Although the sample was homogeneous in terms of all participants having had the experience of attending a YOT, the

participants were from various different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Research indicates that ethnicity and cultural norms affect support-seeking. For example, findings suggest that people of Asian and Asian American ethnic origin benefit more from implicit support (belonging to a social network) than explicit support (including seeking advice and comfort), as it is considered more culturally appropriate. The opposite was true for the participants of European American ethnic origin (Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007). The findings of this research should therefore be viewed with the diversity within this sample in mind. Furthermore, it should be noted that this research was developed with the assumption that talking about and seeking support for emotional difficulties was beneficial. The author who carried out the analysis was of White British ethnicity. As five of the six participants in this study were of Black or Mixed White/Black ethnicity, it is probable that there would have been differences between the cultural influences on the author and the participants. The significance of this should be acknowledged, as this assumption will have influenced the interpretations made regarding the data.

Clinical implications

The aim of IPA research is not to produce findings that can be generalised to the wider population; however, theoretical transferability is possible (Smith et al., 2009), so tentative clinical implications can be made regarding young males who are engaged with city based YOTs and the support services for them.

It is possibly not the perceptions of support-seeking per se but perceptions of the self and others that might prevent this population from using this coping strategy. It might be appropriate to take measures to address some of these perceptions. Services and interventions aimed at increasing young people's views of themselves as 'good' or worthwhile, increasing emotional competence or helping young people who have offended to develop guilt rather than shame may be beneficial. It may be difficult to decrease perceptions of powerlessness when this group is involved in the judicial system. However, within these limits, services may seek to provide increased agency for young people wherever the opportunities arise.

There is a tension for YOTs between having to attend to risk and justice on the one hand and to individual needs and welfare on the other, and the current system has been criticised for becoming overly focused on risk management and neglecting individual need (Gray, 2005). It is possible that being overly focused on risk and justice may lead to participants constructing offending as their only legitimate 'problem'. To address this may require a greater focus on any emotional issues and needs in the young person by the more 'powerful' YOT professionals, to help them to identify these difficulties as legitimate.

Lack of trust may be a particular issue for this population, and this may be difficult to address. However, trust may be increased through both the actions of individuals offering support and the structure of support services. Young people may be more likely to trust services that are transparent in their policies, particularly relating to confidentiality. Individuals offering support should aim to be understanding, empathic, trustworthy, open and honest in their approach to offering or providing support.

Future research

Additional research on this topic would be useful to illuminate further the perceptions and associated behaviours relating to support-seeking in young people attending YOTs. Given that the participants of this research were male, and gender differences have been shown in support-seeking

(Farrand et al., 2007), it would be interesting to carry out similar research with young females attending YOTs.

A further area for future research that may be of value is to explore sense of self in young people who have offended. Investigations of attachment styles and the concept of shame in young people who have offended may be particularly useful.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that participants' perceptions of support-seeking were complex. It was seen as a coping strategy that, in general terms, is beneficial, and participants were able to identify individuals to whom, hypothetically, they could turn for support. However, participants felt that support-seeking was not something that they would/could do. It is tentatively suggested that other perceptions held by the participants, relating to themselves as 'powerless' and 'bad' and others as 'critical' and 'untrustworthy', may influence their ideas about seeking support for themselves. Some of these perceptions may be common to the general population of young people. Some, however, may be specific to, or at least may be exaggerated for, young people who have offended, potentially as a result of the fact that young people who have offended are likely to have had particularly high levels of negative or traumatic experiences (Paton et al., 2009). This research has implications for the practice of Clinical Psychologists and other professionals working with young people who have offended, and also highlights areas for future research, particularly relating to sense of self and the concept of shame.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Appendix One – Interview schedule

- Explain rationale and procedure
- Check participant signed consent form
- Ask if any questions

(For each question prompt as appropriate)

1. Would you mind telling me why you come to the YOT?
2. So, how does coming here fit (or not) with your life?
3. What do you think young people who experience problems of any kind should do?
4. What, if any, types of support are available to you?
5. Do you know anybody who has experienced problems, would you mind telling me about them?
6. If coming here was by choice, would you recommend someone to come here?
 - That is the end of my questions
 - Do you have any questions?
 - How are you feeling?

De-brief sheet

Appendix Two –Theme table

Master theme – Youth Offending Team attendance prompting reflection

Super-ordinate themes

Making sense of the past

Just getting through the present

Hopes and fears for the future

Master theme – Damaged self

Struggling with emotions

Powerlessness

Shamed identity

Master theme – Complexity of relationships

Others as supportive and dangerous

Helping others

Mistrust

Contrasting rules for social support

Master theme - Contradiction

Subthemes

Regret

Making sense of past actions

Life starting again after the YOT

Hopes and aspirations

Fears and concerns

Distancing and minimising

Hiding emotions

Keeping emotions inside

Difficulty expressing emotion

Opening up

Lack of self-efficacy

Lack of options or choices

Pressure

Shame

Self defined by actions

Trying to portray a positive self

Portraying a false self

Stigma and discrimination

Negative influence of others

Supportive influence of others

Helping and supporting others

Protecting others

Awareness of impact of actions on others

Barriers to talking about problems

Enablers to talking about problems

Talking is for girls