



Characteristics of demand and psychological treatments in a university clinic



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 April 2015

Accepted 11 January 2016

Available online 16 February 2016

Keywords:

Empirically supported treatments

Psychological treatments

Effectiveness

Efficiency

Palabras clave:

Tratamientos empíricamente apoyados

Tratamientos psicológicos

Efectividad

Eficiencia

ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study are to describe the most common characteristics of patients receiving psychological treatment and the treatments administered. We analyzed a sample of 856 patients at the University Psychology Clinic of the Complutense University of Madrid. Five diagnostic categories accounted for 78.4% of demand: anxiety disorders (31.9%), no diagnosis (15.4%), other problems requiring clinical attention (14.2%), mood disorders (9.5%) and adaptive disorders (7.4%). A total of 17.7% presented a comorbid diagnosis and 49.3% had received treatment previously. The mean of assessment and treatment sessions was 3.5 and 12.7, respectively. The most commonly applied techniques included psychoeducation (95.1%), cognitive restructuring (74.8%), relaxation (74.4%), and control of internal dialogue (68.1%). Of the patients that had finished contact with the clinic, 68.3% were a therapeutic success. We discuss the generalization of the results and the implications for the profession and clinical practice.

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Características de la demanda y de los tratamientos psicológicos en una clínica universitaria

RESUMEN

Los objetivos del estudio son describir las características de los pacientes que acuden a tratamiento psicológico y de los tratamientos aplicados. Se analiza una muestra de 856 pacientes de la Clínica Universitaria de Psicología de la Universidad Complutense. Cinco categorías diagnósticas cubren el 78.4% de la demanda: trastornos de ansiedad (31.9%), sin diagnóstico (15.4%), otros problemas objeto de atención clínica (14.2%), trastornos del estado de ánimo (9.5%) y trastornos adaptativos (7.4%). El 17.7% presentaba un diagnóstico comórbido y el 49.3% habían recibido un tratamiento previo. La media de sesiones de evaluación fue de 3.5 y 12.7, respectivamente. Las técnicas más utilizadas fueron psicoeducación (95.1%), reestructuración cognitiva (74.8%), relajación (74.4%) y control del diálogo interno (68.1%). De los pacientes que habían finalizado el contacto con el centro el 68.3% obtuvo el alta terapéutica. Se discute la generalización de los resultados e implicaciones para la profesión y la práctica clínica.

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The professional activity of psychologists is socially perceived as positive and the practice of clinical psychology is considered useful and effective, and their clients generally express satisfaction (Buela-Casal et al., 2005). However, information on how clinical psychology actually works is scarce, especially in the healthcare context as opposed to the research context (Kazdin, 2008).

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Thus, there are numerous studies on the professional activity of clinical psychologists in the research field, generally yielding highly positive results, even though few studies have addressed the subject of psychological work and its efficacy in care contexts (effectiveness studies) (Gaston, Abbot, Rapee, & Neary, 2006; Labrador & Ballesteros, 2011; Mastrocinque, De Wet, & Fagioloni, 2013; Peeters et al., 2013). Hence, there are scarcely any data on the type of patients attended or on the treatments applied and their results.

The empirical evidence suggests high levels of efficacy of some psychological treatments, the so-called empirically supported treatments (EST), which tend to be brief and focused on the specific characteristics of each problem. But there is scarcely any evidence of treatment effectiveness (clinical utility) and efficiency (cost/benefit ratio) (Hunsley & Lee, 2007; Szkodny, Newman, & Goldfried, 2014). There is indeed some research highlighting the similarity between practice in care settings and research trials (Nathan, Stuart, & Dolan, 2000; Stirman, DeRubeis, Crits-Christoph, & Rothman, 2005) but, on the other hand, there is some degree of suspicion about whether the application of ESTs in everyday professional practice might lead to a reduction in the percentages of improvement and an increase in the duration of treatments with respect to those achieved in the research context (Chambless, & Ollendick, 2001; Gonzales, Ringeisen, & Chambers, 2002).

Nevertheless, precise knowledge about healthcare practice in clinical psychology is of the utmost interest, since it would permit us to identify the type of problem for which psychological attention is sought, the treatments available and those actually used, their principal characteristics (assessment sessions, treatment sessions, techniques used, etc.) and, especially, the results obtained by each of them. Moreover, it would allow us to observe the extent to which developments and advances in research are appropriate for everyday clinical practice, and whether they are actually applied – that is, to check whether ESTs are employed in healthcare practice and whether the results obtained are similar to those yielded by research work (Chambless, & Ollendick, 2001; Nathan, & Gorman, 2007; Wampold et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, this type of research is not without its difficulties, given that it requires having information available on large samples of patients, psychological problems, and psychotherapists within the context of clinical psychology professional practice. Bearing in mind that the professionals who provide this care are somewhat reluctant to make such data available, an excellent alternative would be to look at the work of university psychology clinics, which offer attention to patients (Bados, Balaguer, & Saldaña, 2007; Borkovec, 2004; Labrador, Estupiñá, & García-Vera, 2010; Minami et al., 2009; Vallejo et al., 2008). Specifically in our country in a review of psychological services within the universities (Saúl, López-González, & Bermejo, 2009), it is stated that 36% of Spanish universities have a service of psychological intervention with a total of 59 psychological services, of which 22 are carried out jointly with the psycho-educational services and 37 are exclusively psychological. In addition to counseling, in almost 60% of mental health services, psychotherapy is also provided and most services are not defined by a unique psychotherapy reference model. In this regard, more than half of the psychological therapy services are available to the general public, whereas the remaining ones are offered in exclusive to the university community. Therefore, there are variations in the cost of services. It seems important to frame this work in clinical care services in the university context with Spanish population to increase awareness about the demands and processes applied in these contexts.

In order to make progress in this direction, we designed the present study, whose goals, all in the context of a university psychology clinic, were: a) to describe the demand for psychological attention; b) to describe the characteristics of treatment and

the results obtained; and c) to assess the costs of psychological treatments.

Method

Participants

Facility description. The University Psychology Clinic of the Complutense University in Madrid (Clínica Universitaria de Psicología de la Universidad Complutense) (CUP-UCM) has been recognized as a health care facility by the Madrid regional government since 1998. The facility fulfils a number of functions, including the provision of outpatient psychological services based on criteria of quality, efficacy, and efficiency. The CUP-UCM is open to the general public and accepts all types of patients seeking treatment there, as long as they do not require hospitalization. Market prices are applied.

There are normally 14 psychologists working at the CUP-UCM. Two of these are supervisors/coordinators, while the other twelve are resident psychologists on two-year terms, the majority of whom are women, with an age range of 25–28. All have a psychology degree (minimum of 5 years' study), with at least one Masters (minimum of two years' extra study) accrediting their specialization in assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of psychological disorders. The postgraduate qualification most commonly held is Masters in Clinical and Health Psychology at the UCM. They get training in Cognitive-Behavioral therapy and between two and three years of supervised clinical practice prior to their starting to work at the Psychology Clinic of the Complutense University (CUP). Therapists are in charge of designing treatments to match patients' needs within an evidence based practice framework (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006) and complying with ESTs guidelines. Therapist work at the CUP is supervised by scholars in clinical psychology and/or psychiatry. Supervision and standardization of treatment materials ensure homogeneity.

Patients. The initial sample was made up of all patients in the general database of the CUP-UCM ($N = 1,325$) since its inauguration in June 1999 and up to February 2008. Of these, we excluded those who had not completed the assessment process ($n = 344$), due to the difficulties for assigning a diagnosis or collecting information on the variables of interest to the study. Patients divide into the following groups: patients whose clinical records lacked values of the variables relevant for the study and for which the omissions could not be rectified; patients classified as “dropout” (after making an appointment they failed to attend the first session), “in pre-treatment assessment process” (their assessment process was still ongoing at the moment of the study), or “intervention in crisis” (patients who attend in emergency situations such as sudden losses, panic attacks, psychotic symptoms, and receive very brief interventions). The final sample comprised 856 patients, of whom 199 were currently in treatment or follow-up and 657 had already concluded their relation with the clinic. Patients still in either treatment or follow-up session were not considered in the analysis of treatment results. All patients were made aware of, and gave consent to, the use of their clinical records for research purposes at the beginning of their relationship with the center.

Design and Variables

The present work constitutes a retrospective and archival study that collects the results of an intentional sample of psychological treatments that took place in a natural setting, which were followed up in a longitudinal fashion.

Data was collected through different questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The tool most used was the “Pauta de

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