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The psychosocial dimension of volunteering in mental health

Abstract

The main purpose of this investigation was the survey of volunteers' role in mental health and professionals' perceptions in volunteering who work in similar institutions. The basic research tool was the semi-structured interview while 25 volunteers and 25 social workers participated in the research. The findings of the research reflect on how important volunteering is in the context of mental health and the major difficulties that social workers face in relation to the management and development of volunteering in places where they work, problems of cooperation and support among staff and volunteers and finally that the reading of personal symptom remains a substantial incentive for volunteering.

Keywords: Volunteering, mental health, motivation, social workers

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Introduction

Voluntarism is an essential expression of assistance to our fellow human beings who are in need as a result of social pathogenesis. Today, because of the economic difficulties that exist and the changes people experience daily in personal parameters such as work, health, education, migration, etc. and the weakness of State institutions to meet their needs, volunteering and personal initiative groups come to bridge the large gap that has been created in order to find solutions to the problems the impasse families and lonely people face. Mental health problems have increased and every day we hear in the news about people who put end to their lives being unable to withstand the psychological burden that they carry because of the financial distress that exists in Greece. Particularly in the field of mental health see the underperforming overall services that offer psychiatric care and psychological help. Throughout this unbearable and intolerable prevailing atmosphere voluntarism is often developing rapidly with new ideas and forms of volunteering to cover needs relating to persons with mental disorders. We could say that voluntarism has taken a form that applies new original ideas that often start in the face of a person and the sequence and response takes large dimensions. The originality and the substantial assistance is what attracts and creates movements with the sole purpose of assistance and relief to those who need support. Perhaps we could say that the conditions are unique and the ground fertile for the fast and direct development of volunteering in mental health.

Volunteering in mental health

Volunteers play a crucial role in mental health often under difficult conditions. This kind of unpaid work reflects a high performance care system for the mental ill which could improve its benefits with the complementary role of the volunteers' force. Volunteers in particular contribute to improve the experience in dealing with patients in psychiatric structures, to build a closer relationship between mental health services and the community, to tackle inequalities regarding access to mental health facilities and to support mental patients who encounter multiple needs (Imison, 2012). The problems which the scientific staff in mental health services face and the increased burnout observed in them highlight the need of the presence of voluntary force in such structures. Mental health professionals face conditions of increased stress in their daily routine. They use their profession as a "tool" in order to be able to overcome a range of powerful emotions they encounter in clinical practice. The relationship between the professional and a mental patient alone causes emotions such as the need for immediate treatment for the patient, a sense of failure and frustration when the mental disorder progresses and is unresponsive to treatment which results in creating feelings of powerlessness, sadness, fear for falling ill themselves and a strong desire for separation and avoidance (Meier et al., 2001). The volunteer, in a number of circumstances arising from the difficult and often importunate environment of a mental health service, is called to cope with roles that may initially seem not so

complex, but in essence they contribute to resolving issues which could affect the whole situation and picture of a person with a psychiatric disorder. In such an environment it is very important in order to have a meaningful voluntary belief from the person who will decide to offer voluntary services at a psychiatric structure, to develop a kind of psychological contact indicating the terms and conditions of an exchange agreement between a volunteer and a structure that offers mental health service (Rousseau, 1989). Through this agreement, the volunteer, in situations of ambiguity and uncertainty in terms of thematic related to his work, may develop a value system that will stabilize the voluntary Treaty (Farmer & Fedor, 1999). The psychological contract affects the attitude and behavior of the person and can bring out feelings that may occur when unaccomplished obligations remain and create feelings such as anger and frustration due to violations of the agreed. Then the reduced satisfaction that a volunteer may get can be detected in these conditions (Zhao et al., 2007). In order to be able to understand the rate of demand and supply of voluntary work it is important to seek out the opportunities that the person tries to find as a surrogate through the dynamics of volunteering. These expectations relate to the volunteer's sex, age and education. At a time when demand for psychiatric care is on the increase, a large part of bibliography mentions the public's negative attitudes towards people with mental illness (Jaeckel & Wieser, 1970). Especially see negative stereotypes and discriminatory behavior in reports for landlords who refuse to lease property to people with mental disorders and employers who give no opportunity for employment to people with psychiatric disorders. Social behaviors of this kind confirm us about the level of illiteracy that exists in the general public about mental illness (Jorm, 2000). In a survey done by Angermeyer & Dietrich (2006) it was found that the tendency of people to distance themselves because they consider their behavior "unpredictable and dangerous". Under the care for people with mental disorders volunteers deliberately look for contact in order to provide care for these people. It is a type of volunteering that we could call one-to-one. The relationship starts with the volunteer's support towards the user of psychiatric services and is monitored by an organization usually non-governmental (Dean & Goodlad, 1998). The relationship is non-judgmental, mutual and deliberate while there is a commitment to the rendering of services for some period of time. Exact figures for the number of volunteers worldwide in the field of mental health do not exist. In the Austrian region of Styria, with a population of 1.2 million people a voluntary organization has only 298 volunteers who work with individuals facing mental disorders while in East London with a population of 750,000 people in national health system 250 volunteers are employed. Volunteers can provide persons with psychiatric problems with distinct and more regular services than mental health professionals, thereby facilitating their social integration.

Methodological framework of the research

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between social work and voluntarism in the field of mental health. On the one hand, through the emergence of the discourse of social workers it is attempted to investigate the importance of developing a network of volunteers, the dimensions of the relationship between a professional and volunteers and the surveillance the former of the two exercises on the latter. On the other hand, through the emergence of the discourse of volunteers it is attempted to investigate the motivation of the volunteers and the difficulties they encounter. Our main concern was to outline, individual dimensions related to behaviors, personal experiences, attitudes and perceptions of respondents about the functionality of the phenomenon of volunteering mainly in matters of relationships between a volunteer and a professional, the role of supervision, management of emotions and valuation of the material carried by the volunteer, the volunteer's face shields in crisis situations, focus of voluntary action, forms of communication used etc.

Sample and selection criteria

The target groups were professional social workers who worked in mental health institutions and had supervised or not volunteers and social workers who work in non-governmental organizations with volunteers in the context of mental health and who are supervised by them. Finally, the target groups were volunteers who offered volunteer work in various mental health facilities within the community. Our sample came from agencies and non-governmental organizations active in the field of mental health in large cities such as Thessaloniki and Athens and towns located in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. In the first phase, 25 professional social workers and 25 volunteers who work and offer volunteer work respectively were involved in the research.

Research tool

For the collection of data a semi-structured interview was used that was conducted by professional social workers and volunteers. Each type of interview had concrete structure with predetermined questions and flexibility regarding formulation and modification of the content when it was necessary depending on the interviewee and the flow of the discussion topics.

Data Analysis

The ratio of social workers

Through the categorization and classification of data it seems that social workers are not ready to manage the chapter volunteers because there are no suitable means such as space, time, personal experience and education and a more particular institutional context. «The center is not ready to manage them» (SW1) «We do not know what to do with them» (SW1). Many times these problems are attributed to services that do not want the immediacy within the community and do operate under a closed framework. «The management of the center wanted a much more closed center» (SW1). In other cases these services are presented without any particular tasks «Here, sometimes, services do not have a specific object» (SW5). Other social workers believe that this will be very difficult because the space is under medical effect «... I find it difficult, the space is under medical effect». This makes them recede in relation to the purely biological position for the treatment of mental patients. Regarding the motives of volunteering many social workers believe that they would be the knowledge of issues related to psychopathology «... an incentive would be generally the knowledge for people who have serious mental problems ...» (SW11). Perhaps for some it is a way to test their limits which is why they offer volunteer work «... we might want to test our limits, our powers» (SW13). Motivation, as social workers state, is often, also, targeting to vocational rehabilitation and a future collaboration with the service «... wanted to volunteer aiming at a later collaboration» (SW7). A main motive for volunteering is also, social workers say, the effort to solve personal and emotional problems through the knowledge of mental diseases that volunteers acquire «refers to their own emotional development and solution to their problems» (SW14).

The ratio of volunteers

The analysis and categorization of the research material obtained from volunteers showed the following: their relationship with professionals was classified as typical but in some cases positive, although it seems that volunteers are in the need of more support and cooperation with professionals. «Relationships are typical but with positive standard» (VOL 1). This partnership makes them feel more effective and safe in their voluntary contribution. As a key incentive for voluntary work they mention that this benefited them psychologically and practically through the help for mental patients, they felt that they got a kind of feedback that helped them feel better emotionally «... I always wanted to give something to my fellowmen ... Not only did I give but I also took back which felt good ... it benefited me psychologically». They appeared to be willing to learn issues related to psychology of the person with psychopathology « I always loved psychology and I liked to deepen into people, into their psychology» (VOL 3). There was a strong feeling that they tried to use a kind of

psychological issues in the relationships and attitudes of the people with whom they interact. Through voluntary work there is emotional involvement and limits may in some cases hardly be maintained «... most of them are deserted, so they see us as one of their men, as a relative...» (VOL 4).

Discussion

As it transpired by this research volunteering in mental health forms a crucial and important part of both professionals and volunteers themselves. Professionals mentioned several concerns about issues such as volunteer management and shortages which reflect difficult conditions regarding lack of training, time and essential incentives. Volunteers ask in turn for a more essential role in statutory positions in volunteer work that will safeguard and give a more qualitative dimension to their role. Most concepts which are recorded result in volunteers considering their work to be very important. The coexistence of professional and volunteer is necessary in a context where conditions often operate under increased pressure. To provide meaningful therapeutic response to mental disorders a more comprehensive and holistic intervention is needed at all levels.

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**Victim-offender mediation in the juvenile justice system:
The Greek legislation in the light of restorative justice theory**

Abstract

The Law 3189 of 2003 introduced victim-offender mediation (VOM) in the Greek legal order as an educative measure for juvenile offenders imposed by Juvenile Courts. According to the Explanatory Report of this Law, juvenile supervisors play the role of mediators between the offenders and their victims. This decision of the Greek legislator is critically viewed under the light of restorative justice theory. It is noticed that the responsibilities of juveniles' supervisors are mainly offender-focused. As a result, neutrality may be at risk. Furthermore, communication between mediators and victims is minimal; the victims' needs may be put aside. It is concluded that the Greek state has not taken seriously into account the main theoretical principles of mediation and restorative justice. The author proposes that a specialized Department should be created in Greece that consists of well-qualified mediators, who will not be otherwise connected with the offenders and the victims.