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Ethnic Differences in Therapy Outcome for Foster Youth

Breniel Q. Lemley, Rosana M. Aguilar, Saralyn C. Ruff, Ph.D., June M. Clausen, Ph.D.



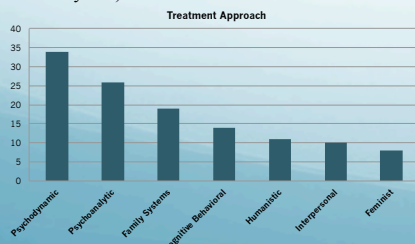
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

- Children placed into foster care are at increased risk for multiple mental health problems.
- Children of color, particularly Black children, are overrepresented in the foster care system.
- Previous studies have shown lower rates of mental health service use among Black children compared to all other ethnic groups in the foster care system.
- Ethnic differences in therapy outcome have not been examined among foster youth.
- Research has shown that Relationship-Based Therapy reduces many mental health symptoms in foster youth.
- The current study evaluates the impact of Relationship-Based Therapy on a random sample of Black and White foster youth receiving treatment through a national non-profit organization that provides pro-bono mental health treatment to current and former foster youth with one therapist “for as long as it takes.”

METHOD

Therapist Participants (N = 40)

- Mean Age: 45.41 years ($SD = 10.99$ years)
- 80% Female
- 92.5% White
- 52.5% Licensed Psychologists
- Mean Clinical Experience = 10.43 years ($SD = 7.92$ years)



METHOD

Measures

Semi-structured telephone interviews at the beginning and end of treatment that include questions about therapist and patient demographics, patient symptoms, treatment parameters, and treatment progress.

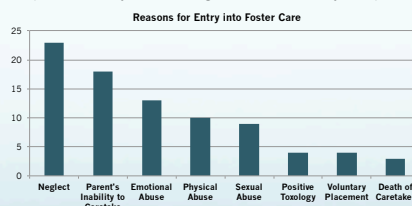
Procedure

- Receive therapist contact information from non-profit organization
- Recruit therapist participants by sending letters and calling therapists about the study
- Conduct Initial Telephone Interview with therapists within three months of the start of treatment
- Conduct Exit Telephone Interview with therapists within three months of treatment termination

RESULTS

Patient Demographics (N = 40)

- Ethnicity: Black ($n = 20$) and White ($n = 20$)
- 80% female
- School-aged at start of treatment: $M = 9.97$ years ($SD = 4.78$ years, Range: 2.60 - 21.28 years)



Parameters of Treatment

- Frequency of Treatment: 70% once per week; 20% once every other week
- Average Length of Treatment: 3.55 years ($SD = 2.55$ years, Range: 0.50 - 11.35 years)

RESULTS

Overall Changes in Mental Health Symptoms

Symptoms	n	Start of Treatment		End of Treatment		Sig. Value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Anxiety	40	3.625	0.868	2.850	1.026	0.000
Dissociative Symptoms	38	2.289	1.137	1.842	0.945	0.003
Peer Relationship Problems	40	3.025	1.025	2.475	1.037	0.003
School Problems	39	2.615	1.480	2.000	1.277	0.094
Anger Problems	22	2.955	1.290	2.318	1.129	0.007
Depression	40	3.125	0.939	2.650	1.027	0.009
Conduct Problems	40	2.825	1.259	2.275	1.086	0.010
Enuresis	35	1.342	0.765	1.028	0.169	0.014
Substance Use/Abuse/Dependence	39	1.000	0.000	1.282	0.724	0.020
Problems with Current Living Situation	37	3.027	1.040	2.594	1.363	0.077
Sleep Problems	39	2.154	1.040	1.923	1.010	0.107
Problems with Family of Origin	38	3.053	1.576	2.737	1.518	0.172
Suicidality	39	1.154	0.432	1.282	0.560	0.230
Encopresis	36	1.056	0.333	1.028	0.167	0.324
Psychotic Thoughts/Behaviors	38	1.289	0.694	1.397	0.887	0.324
Legal Problems	40	1.275	1.025	1.400	1.037	0.376
Eating Problems	40	1.850	1.292	1.700	1.067	0.412
Hearing Problems	22	1.409	0.854	1.318	0.716	0.427
Learning Problems	39	2.462	1.553	2.308	1.281	0.438
Self-Injurious Behavior	39	1.590	0.938	1.462	0.883	0.473
Sexual Behaviors	39	1.743	1.117	1.615	1.091	0.482
Eating Problems	40	1.185	1.129	1.700	1.067	0.412
Truancy	38	1.157	0.494	1.132	0.578	0.812
Risk Taking	38	2.000	1.162	1.974	1.103	0.906

Ethnic Differences

- Repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant difference in reported school problems between Black and White foster youth over the course of treatment, $F(1,37) = 7.336, p = 0.010$. Black foster youth had significantly greater school problems ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.35$) compared to White foster youth ($M = 2.05, SD = 1.39$) at the start of treatment. At the end of treatment, Black foster youth still had significantly greater school problems ($M = 2.42, SD = 1.34$) compared to White foster youth ($M = 1.60, SD = 1.09$).
- No other significant differences were found in mental health symptoms between White and Black foster youth.

DISCUSSION

- This sample of Black and White foster youth, who were randomly selected from a group of foster youth who were removed from home for reasons of neglect, parent's inability to caretake, and/or emotional abuse, and while in foster care, received long-term Relationship Based Therapy, demonstrated a variety of mental health symptoms and attended long-term weekly/bi-weekly psychotherapy for 3.5 years.
- Findings indicate that Relationship-Based Therapy significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety, dissociative symptoms, peer relationship problems, school problems, anger problems, depression, conduct problems, and enuresis in this sample of foster youth.
- Substance use problems increased over the course of treatment; this increase may be due to change in patient age over the course of long-term treatment.
- Although Relationship-Based Therapy revealed significant decreases in school problems (truancy, suspensions, expulsions) over the course of treatment, Black children had significantly higher school problems at the start and end of treatment; research suggests that ethnic differences in school problems may stem from a variety of sources including social support, cultural norms of behavior, access to resources, and attachment.
- Limitations of this study include a small sample size, potential bias of therapist informants, and lack of a comparison group. Future research should address these issues and further examine ethnic differences in treatment outcomes among foster youth.

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