Asking about Trauma: The Experiences of Psychological Therapists in Early Intervention Services

Adult Mental Health

Thesis Abstract

Research has shown that traumatic childhood events such as child abuse can be a causal factor in the development of psychotic symptoms. The nature of this relationship remains complex and is still poorly understood. Evidence has shown that practitioners do not ask, and do not acknowledge the need to ask about the childhood experiences of individuals with psychosis.

The literature review acknowledges the cognitive-developmental framework and the contributions this has made in exploring the link between early experiences and psychosis. The review then introduces ‘attachment theory’ suggesting that this theory could enhance existing cognitive-developmental conceptualisations of psychosis. The need to consider both the ‘cognitive-developmental’ framework and attachment theory is supported, with implications for clinical work with this client group and further research is clearly required.

The research project explored the experiences and views of seven psychological therapists who work with individuals with early psychosis, when asking about childhood abuse. The Grounded Theory analysis revealed that psychological therapists have their own ‘model of psychosis’ that has developed over time and in line with their beliefs about psychosis. It reflected why they feel it is important to ask about abuse, and thereby how they ask about abuse. The ‘model of psychosis’ expressed by the psychological therapists followed a psychological, trauma based,
formulation orientated model of psychosis. Consistency throughout the ‘model of psychosis,’ the ‘service culture’ and the ‘process of asking’ provides an optimum environment for asking about abuse. The research findings have implications for the ‘skills based’ training packages developed in this clinical area, and a conceptual theory has been developed which could be applied to other services, training and skills development.

The strengths and limitations of this research project and my personal reflections of my research journey are discussed.