

My PhD idea: Compulsive Helping

Qualitative research to define Compulsive Helping and locate it within the taxonomy of addiction psychology

PhD idea I am grateful to the Society for the Study of Addiction for permitting me to submit this PhD idea

though I am not yet a PhD student and am still in the process of formulating my research

direction.

The Issue My interest in this topic arose from my private practice as an integrative psychotherapist. I have a

long-term client with a distressing persistent condition that I've come to understand best as

'Compulsive Helping' because it has the hallmarks of an addiction.

The client My client seeks external validation, acceptance and a sense of belonging compulsively, in an

effort to avoid a fear of exclusion and abandonment, in a process of negative reinforcement.

Compulsive I see Compulsive Helping as prosocial behaviour that has run out of control. It can be understood

as

Helping self-medication, codependency, a complex trauma, a survival schema, chronic shame (de Young,

2015), an obsessive compulsive adaptation and/or repetition compulsion (Freud, 1920). I suggest it is here conceived of as a behavioural addiction in its own right. I further suggest it should be viewed from an attachment perspective (Flores, 2004, Gill, 2014) suggestive of treatments based

on Affect Regulation Theory, Polyvagal Theory and Embodied Psychology.

Aims To define Compulsive Helping nomothetically and locate it within the taxonomy of addiction

psychology. Possibly, therefore, also to investigate the application of Polyvagal Theory.

Request | I am looking for leads to a potential Academic Supervisor with experience in two or

more of my areas of interest: Behavioural Addictions, Qualitative Research, Affect Regulation

Theory, Polyvagal Theory and Embodied Psychology.

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Declaration: No conflict of interests arises in this proposed research







Compulsive Helping

"It is progressive and destructive like any other addiction" (Lefever, 2014, p.74).

Research Justification

Whilst much has been written about compulsive helpers in the context of codependency, portrayed as enabling addicts and as badly affected by addiction as the addict themselves (e.g. *The Lois Wilson Story*, Borchert, 2009), little has been written about Compulsive Helping *per se* and no agreed definition exists.

Addictive Characteristics

Symptoms are typical (see Lefever, 2014, p.59): dependency, opportunity-seeking, preoccupation with use, use for mood alteration effect, protection of supply, repeatedly using more than planned, having a higher consumption capacity than others, tolerance reducing over time and continuing to use despite progressively damaging consequences, including psychotic episodes.

Treatment Resistance

Treatment resistance is likewise typical: denial, minimalisation, compartmentalisation, epistemic rigidity.

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Addiction as an attachment disorder

Attachment Theory has an ethological basis and "nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution" (Dobzhansky, 1973). Flores (2004, p.7) wrote: "Because of a person's difficulty maintaining emotional closeness with others, certain vulnerable individuals are more likely to substitute a vast array of obsessive-compulsive behaviours (e.g. sex, food, drugs, alcohol, work, gambling, computer games etc.) that serve as a distraction from the gnawing emptiness and internal discomfort that threatens to overtake them." Gill (2014, p.27) saw addiction "in terms of trauma and personality, and... as self-medicalising response to internal suffering."







Qualitative Research

Semi-structured interviews analysed by thematic analysis. Additional data obtained from

Participants

Six to eight participants, thematic analysis. Quantitative measures will be needed to

Measures

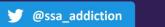
e.g. SCI-TALS Structured clinical interview for trauma and loss; and TALS-SR Self-Report Instrument (Dell'Osso et al., 2009); SPQ for cross-addictions (Christo et al., 2003), SIV Survey of Interpersonal Values (Gordon, 1960), SMS for self-medication (James & French, 2008), Spann-Fischer Codependency Scale (Spann, 1991), CTI Complex Trauma Inventory (Brown & Spinazzola, 2017), YSQ-S3 schema guestionnaire (Young & Brown, 2005), ISS for internalised shame (Cook, 1988); Y-BOCS for obsessive compulsive adaptations (Goodman et al., 1989), DY-BOCS for obsessive compulsive symptom dimensions (Rosario-Campos et al., 2006), ECR-R attachment style (Fraley et al., 2000), NEO PI-3 personality traits (McCrae et al., 2005), RSES self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), SCC self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996).

Qualitative Research

A nomothetic definition of Compulsive Helping within the taxonomy of addiction psychology, illustrated by thematic analysis.

Research

Quantitative Instruments used to distinguish Compulsive Helping from cross-addictions and comorbidities may acquire wider application as a screening tool. I desire some indication of treatability, showing that Compulsive Helping is amenable to treatment by an embodied psychology but it may be too





for one research project.

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