



WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENCES OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS WORKING WITH PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

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INTRODUCTION

- People with intellectual disabilities experience higher rates of morbidity, mortality, asthma, diabetes and obesity compared to the general population, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19 (NHSE, 2020).
- The cumulative impacts of stress associated with the fear of contracting COVID-19, social distancing and quarantine measures can negatively impact mental health of some people (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

- Given that people with intellectual disabilities experience higher rates of mental ill-health (Cooper et al., 2015; Cooper et al., 2007; Emerson & Hatton, 2007), quarantine measures may trigger an escalation of problem behaviours due to a disruption of familiar routines and restriction on the physical environment (Courtenay & Perera, 2020).
- Furthermore, COVID-19 lockdown measures have led to service provision for people with intellectual disabilities being cut back due to staff sickness and closures of day-care and respite services, further compromising mental health of people with intellectual disabilities (Evans, 2020).

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

- Psychologists providing mental health support to people with intellectual disabilities report poorer mental wellbeing and higher occupational stress.
- Moreover, they raise concerns about the ability of people with intellectual disabilities to engage with digital technologies for mental health support in the context of reduced face-to-face psychological provision (Langdon et al., 2021).
- Understanding psychologists' experiences of working with people with intellectual disabilities during the pandemic will help to identify more effective ways of tailoring service provision to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities, and consider how to support clinicians in the delivery of care.

METHODS

- Ethical approval was obtained from Coventry University Ethics Committee (project code P117341).
- Epistemological position of this research was interpretivist. In accordance with the epistemological position, this study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).
- Sample of 11 Clinical Psychologists (CPs) was recruited using purposive sampling method. Of the 11 participants, majority were female ($n = 10$, 91%), with an age range of 32-54 years ($M = 41$).
- Data was collected using semi-structured interviews.
- Interviews were conducted remotely, via MS Teams during the 3rd COVID-19 lockdown in England (March 2021).

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
<i>Job role</i>	Clinical Psychologist HCPC registered	Any other job role Trainee psychologists
<i>Setting</i>	NHS service England Community	Private providers Any other country of the UK Primary or tertiary care, inpatient settings
<i>Patient group</i>	ID and/or autism Adults	Any other patient group Children

STAGES OF IPA ANALYSIS (SMITH, 2007)

Stage of analysis	Procedure
1	Reading and re-reading
2	Initial noting
3	Developing emergent themes
4	Searching for connections across emergent themes
5	Moving to the next case
6	Looking for patterns across cases

RESULTS

Superordinate Themes

Survive or Thrive

“Left to their own devices”

Subordinate Themes

“I feel like a speck in the base of a tsunami”

“My headspace is filled up”

“When the rule book gets thrown out the window”

“God only knows what's going on behind the closed doors”

“Lots of red tape to get around”

SUPERORDINATE THEME: SURVIVE OR THRIVE

- ***Survive or Thrive*** highlighted the challenges and successes CPs experienced while working during the pandemic. This superordinate theme includes three subordinate themes of *“I feel like a speck in the base of a tsunami”*, *“My head space is filled up”* and *“When the rule book gets thrown out the window”*
- CPs endured an emotional onslaught throughout the pandemic, often leading to feelings of burnout. Delivering services remotely impaired CP’s ability to deliver interventions effectively. They survived by utilising defence mechanisms and by establishing ways to connect with others.
- Enduring the pandemic was hindered by CPs reporting a merging between their working selves and their personal identities due to the blurring of boundaries between work and home life. This surreptitious blurring of boundaries hindered their ability to navigate challenges.
- However, despite this some psychologists flourished working in new ways of working. Working through the pandemic brought about a number of unanticipated benefits.

SUPERORDINATE THEME: LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES

- “**Left to their own devices**” described psychologists’ experiences of people with intellectual disabilities as insignificant and forgotten within society and the systems around them during the COVID-19 pandemic. This superordinate theme contained two subordinate themes, “*God only knows what's going on behind the closed doors*” and “*Lots of red tape to get around*”
- The pandemic brought into sharper focus how cut off people with intellectual disabilities generally are in society and highlighted how COVID management strategies did not take into account the needs of people with intellectual disabilities.
- Psychologists felt abandoned in their battle with services in advocating for their clients, at times felt powerless to help.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

- The current study adds to the literature in two areas. Firstly, it highlights CPs' ability to adapt to extremely challenging circumstances. Secondly, it exposes the vulnerabilities of people with intellectual disabilities and highlights the gaps in mental health service provision to meet their needs adequately.
- The sample consisted of majority female participants, which, although representative of the field, may not adequately capture experiences of male CPs. Further, the small sample size, appropriate for IPA methodology, limits generalisability of findings to the broader experiences of CPs.

IMPLICATIONS: POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Given that going forward the NHS is likely to adopt a blended style of healthcare delivery, offering both in person and remote intervention options, there is a great need for policy to address the digital exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. To ensure equity of access to technology, policy should improve the digital literacy of clients and their carers. Provision of financial support to access appropriate equipment for this population is also a necessity.
- Additionally, intellectual disability services may benefit from investing in leadership training to enhance support processes for managers.
- CPs may benefit from continued support and supervision in use of digital technology to conduct remote interventions safely. Similarly, CPs may need robust protocols in place for assessing and monitoring risk during telephone consultations.
- There is a clear need for improved access to mental health support for clinicians.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- This research provides a perspective on how people with intellectual disabilities engaged with remote delivery of services through the CPs' lens. However, research into experiences of people with intellectual disabilities and their carers is needed to truly understand their views of accessing mental health care remotely.
- Given the variability of CPs' response to the challenges presented by COVID-19, it may be pertinent to examine factors affecting individuals' stress and resilience to develop more effective strategies to support clinicians in crisis situations.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFESSIONALS?

- There is a clear need to look after our and our colleagues' wellbeing and to maintain connections with others when working remotely.
- This research has highlighted a need for better training and supervision for delivering psychological interventions remotely.
- People with Autism appear to engage better with psychological interventions delivered remotely and as such can be routinely offered this option.
- People with intellectual disabilities may require additional adaptations to support effective use of technology and therefore access mental health provision, including access to technology and training for service users and their carers.



ALIGNMENT WITH PPN VISION

- This research supports the Psychological Professions vision in the commitment to help our communities to thrive by highlighting the social inequalities that people with ID and their carers may experience, the impact of this on emotional distress, and outlining recommendations of how access to psychological support can be improved.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME



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