

The Role of Psychotherapy for At-risk Youth

Talya Bedford

Columbia University, Psychology Department

Research Question

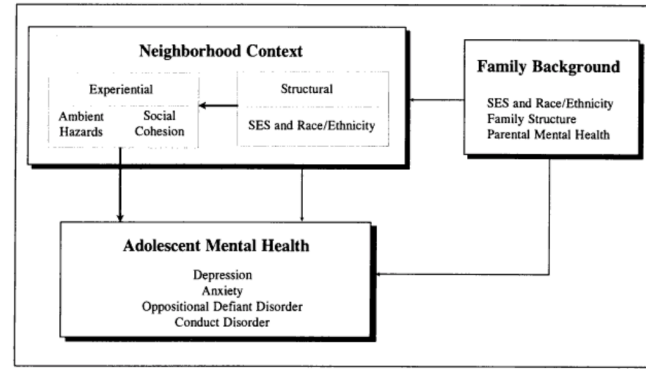
What role does psychotherapy play in the lives of those who may be struggling with competing threats to their mental and physical well-being such as food insecurity, lack of shelter, or other issues that may pose a survival risk?

Background

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs prioritizes physiological and safety needs over emotional needs
- Young adults in poverty experience more psychological distress than young adults not in poverty
- Higher levels of depression and anti-social behavior exist for individuals who grew up in poverty



Figure 1. Contextual Effects on Adolescent Mental Health



Study Design

- Recruit 100 young adults ages 12-24 from a social services organization who are marked as having faced issues with homelessness or food insecurity
- Code participants, using a natural field experiment design, on whether or not they decide to take advantage of a free psychotherapy service.
- Use a questionnaire to track variables over time in both groups related to overall well-being. Variables studied will include levels of functioning, problem-solving abilities, and overall satisfaction in life, as reported by participants at the beginning of the study, one month after study begins, and three months after study begins.

Hypothesis

I predict that individuals marked as having faced issues such as homelessness or food insecurity who choose to take part in a voluntary and free psychotherapy service will show higher levels of life-satisfaction, functioning, and problem-solving abilities than those who choose not to take part in the service.

Next Steps

If my hypothesis is supported, this could suggest that psychotherapy not only is a service that improves the lives of those who are at-risk, but also a service that can help these individuals problem-solve and access other basic needs more easily as a result.

References

- McLeod, J., & Shanahan, M. (1996). Trajectories of Poverty and Children's Mental Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 37(3), 207-220. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137292>
- Taormina, R., & Gao, J. (2013). Maslow and the Motivation Hierarchy: Measuring Satisfaction of the Needs. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 126(2), 155-177. [doi:10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.2.0155](https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.2.0155)
- McLeod, J., & Shanahan, M. (1993). Poverty, Parenting, and Children. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 34(4), 293-310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095905>
- Aneshensel, C., & Sucoff, C. (1996). The Neighborhood Context of Adolescent Mental Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 37(4), 293-310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137258>