Exploring the experiences of clients with Learning Disabilities completing Research Measures

Alison McLauchlan
Student MA Person Centred Experiential
Counselling & Psychotherapy Practice
alisonmclauchlan105@gmail.com

Aims and Purpose

This research seeks to understand the experience of people with Learning Disabilities (LD) in completing research measures as part of their therapy at a research clinic and how potential issues around accessibility may impact on their responses.

The increased use of research measures outside of clinical settings has many benefits for both client and therapist, yet having a document which the therapist can access but the client cannot may impact on the trust and power balance within the therapeutic relationship.

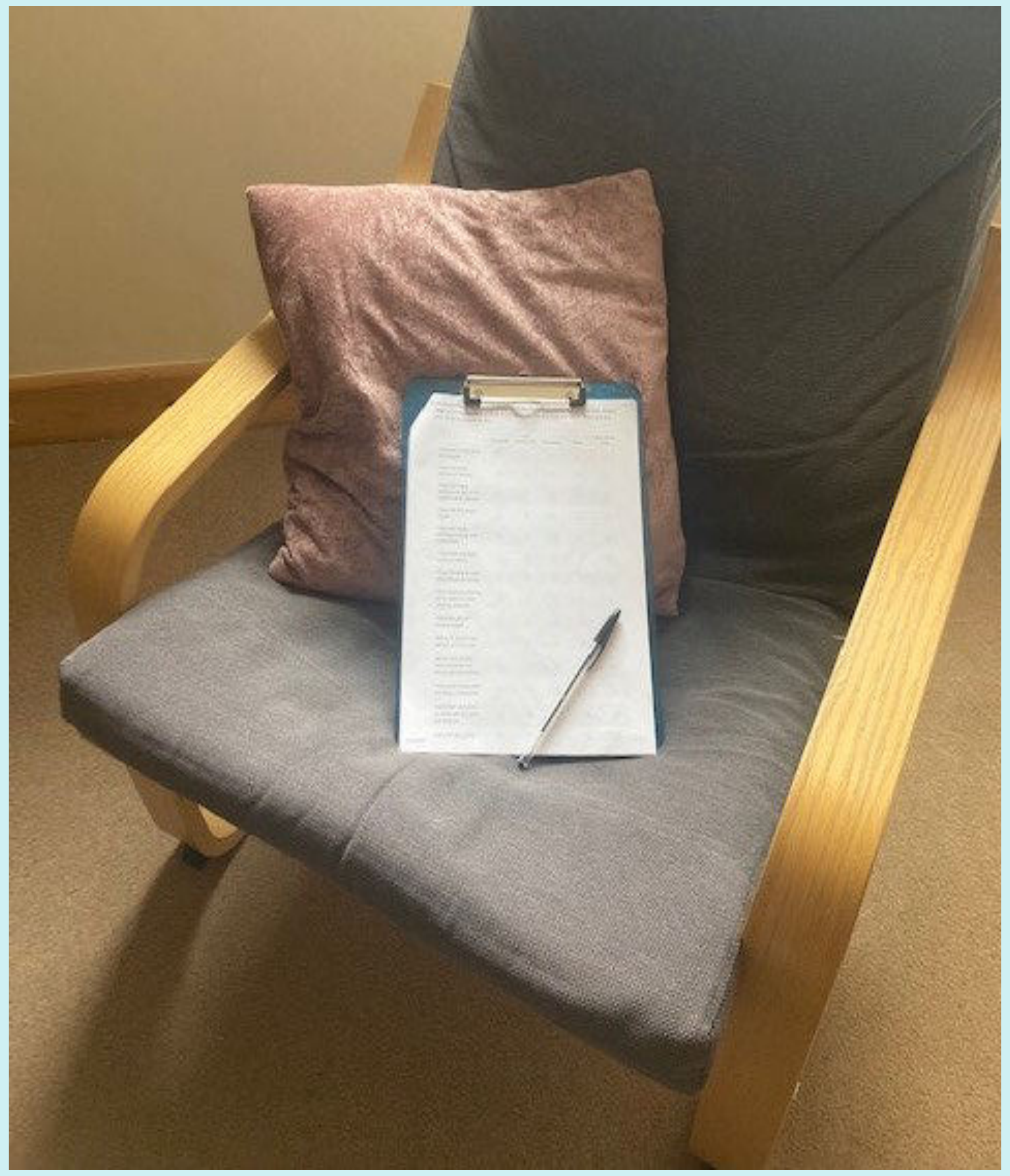
Quantitative research is primarily concerned about validity, yet if clients with learning disabilities have difficulties accessing and understanding the measures, then the results could be unreliable and unrepresentative.

Identifying specific issues around the accessibility of research measures is an important step towards finding solutions.

Methodology

This a qualitative study, chosen because it feels most appropriate as the research base is missing and is in keeping with the social justice aspect of the project, giving a voice to a marginalised group. It has two parts, with in-depth relational semi-structured interviews with both clients and their therapists. The semi structured design allows participants greater autonomy in raising and exploring issues pertinent to them. These will then be transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis,. The data will be triangulated by fellow students to validate findings and ensure the robustness of the study

Given the parameters of the project as an MA dissertation, it is not possible for this research to be inclusive research with the participants as co-researchers, however I am trying to follow the principles and values of inclusive research (Nind and Vinha 2021) as much as possible, ensuring that each stage of the process is as inclusive and accessible as possible, including seeking advice with my written communication and taking into consideration any reasonable adjustments that need making, for example, allowing greater time for interviewing to allow for longer processing time.



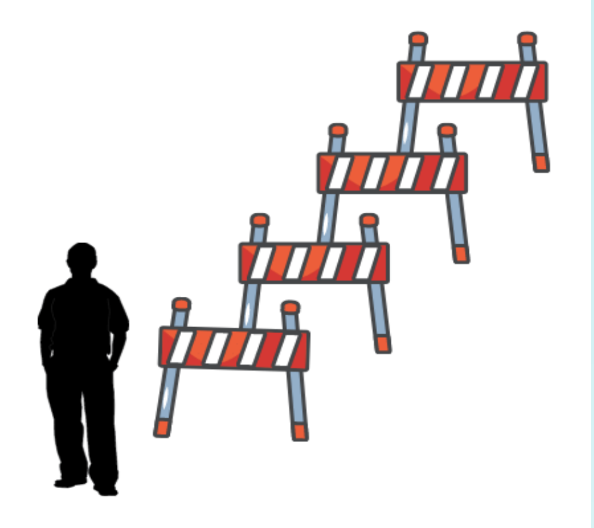
Ethical Considerations

This project has been approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Nottingham and is following the BACP Ethical Guidelines for Research in the Counselling Profession (Mitchel 2018). All participants have given informed consent.

In devising this study I have had to acknowledge my own privilege as someone without a learning disability. I need to be aware of not perpetuating any negative experiences the participants may have had accessing therapy or other health services.

I am mindful that revisiting potentially challenging experiences could be upsetting for the participants whilst also being aware that they may equally welcome the opportunity to talk at a deep personal level about their experiences, which in turn may be affirming and transformational (Finlay 2015).

Key Learnings from Literature Review



People with Learning disabilities:

- represent a significant part of the population
- experience higher than average levels of mental distress
- face significant barriers in accessing therapy and other mental health services
- are significantly under represented in counselling and psychotherapy research

There is a lack of awareness for the requirements for accessible communication within the counselling and psychotherapy community

- Learning Disability is a protected characteristic (Equality and Human Rights Act 2010)
- NHS Information Accessible Standard “applies to all mental health services, whether provided by the NHS, local councils or the independent or voluntary sector” (Turner & Bates 2017 p 14)

Results and Findings

No Findings as yet. As the research clinic worked remotely during the pandemic no research measures were collected, so it has taken longer than anticipated to identify and recruit participants.

Limitations

It is a small scale study and only draws participants from a single research clinic, so it is limited in both its size and geographical location and may not be representative of experiences elsewhere

Only clients that have chosen to disclose that they have a Learning Disability at the intake interview are able to be included. Not all who have a Learning Disability may be aware or may have chosen not to disclose this so this further impacts on how representative this study is.

Given the research question, the participants who responded are mainly dyslexic. I had hoped to also catch the experience of autistic clients, who may also have issues around accessibility in terms of understanding and interpreting words or phrases, not just around layout and sentence length. However many autistic people do not consider their autism to be a disability.

Conclusions and Implications

People with learning and literacy difficulties experience a higher proportion of mental health issues than the general population, therefore it is important that this part of the population is captured within the research data and in a way that respects the autonomy of the clients.

Unless researchers are explicitly aware and actively capturing the experience of participants with learning disabilities they are likely to be missed and their needs will remain invisible.

Specific issues around accessibility and inclusivity in the collecting of research measures need to be identified so that research measures can be more accessible in the future.

References

Equality and Human Rights Act (2010), London: HMSO.
Finlay, L. (2015) Qualitative Methods in Vossler, A. & Moller, N. (ed) *The Counselling and Psychotherapy Research Handbook.* London: SAGE pp 164-182
Turner, S., and Bates, P. (2017) *Green Light Toolkit: A guide to auditing and improving your mental health service so that it is effective in supporting people with autism and people with learning disabilities* London: National Development Team for Inclusion.