

Isabelle Elisabeth Rek

Dr. sc. hum.

Interpersonal characteristics of volunteer counselor trainees and psychotherapist trainees

Fach/Einrichtung: Klinische Psychosomatik

Doktorvater: Prof. Dr. Henning Schauenburg

The focus of this doctoral thesis was on the investigation of interpersonal motives and related therapist variables in two different samples: paraprofessional volunteer counselor trainees in the first study and professional CBT and PDT psychotherapy trainees in the second study. In psychotherapy research, interpersonal motives, attachment styles and the ability to mentalize are considered as key “therapist variables”. However, it is unclear which interpersonal values are characteristic for those individuals who strive for volunteering in TES counselor training and for those who aim to become psychotherapists. Accordingly, the empirical studies comprising this dissertation were designed to investigate these therapist variables and compare the two samples with representative groups from the German population.

The first study examined the interpersonal motives of volunteer counselor trainees and further investigated their capacity to mentalize (MZQ), attachment-related anxiety and avoidance (ECR-RD), personality traits (BFI), life satisfaction (LSQ), and expectations regarding their future counseling style (adapted DPCCQ). Therefore, a sample of 261 volunteer trainees was recruited within the German nationwide organization *TelefonSeelsorge* at the beginning of their paraprofessional training. Interpersonal motives were described according to the Interpersonal Circumplex Model with the Structural Summary Method. Compared to a matched non-clinical reference group from a representative survey, trainee counselors reported a significantly lower magnitude in interpersonal motives on most circumplex scales except harmony (LM) and helpful influence (NO). A cluster analysis revealed three distinct subgroups of trainees, which can be described as predominantly submissive-altruistic, helpful-influential, and friendly-harmonious. The three subgroups further differed in the Big Five personality traits extraversion, neuroticism and agreeableness, as well as in self-reported ability to mentalize, attachment anxiety and avoidance, but not in life satisfaction. Furthermore, the groups differed with regard to their expected counseling style.

Based on the finding that there were distinct subgroups of paraprofessional TES volunteers, each with different interpersonal motives, the second study aimed to examine if there

were also interpersonal subgroups in the professional therapist sample and if the trainees of different therapeutic schools (CBT and PDT) differed in their interpersonal motives. The second study additionally analyzed differences in attachment styles between therapist trainees and a matched reference sample from a representative survey. Furthermore, differences between candidates of the two major theoretical orientations on their expected ideal therapeutic style and their actual experienced in-session feelings with patients were investigated. The sample for the second study included 285 therapist trainees who were enrolled in either CBT or PDT training programs. The trainees were recruited via their training institutes either for a paper-pencil or an online assessment. Participants answered questionnaires on interpersonal motives (CSIV), attachment (ECR-RD), and their ideal therapeutic style and in-session feelings (DPCCQ). The results showed that therapist trainees reported higher interpersonal motives regarding harmony and lower scores on attachment-related avoidance compared to two matched non-clinical reference samples from representative surveys. The profile of interpersonal motives among the therapist trainees was homogeneous, and most differences between the orientation-based subgroups were small. Compared to the CBT group, PDT therapist trainees reported a higher motive for agency, but were slightly less motivated by communal values. Further differences between the two subgroups were found in their levels of attachment avoidance, in-session feelings of anxiety, and ideal therapeutic style.

Summarizing the findings of the two studies, the interpersonal motives of counselor and therapist trainees can be described as predominantly friendly-harmonious compared to the respective non-clinical matched reference samples from representative surveys. Interestingly, the TES sample contained three distinct interpersonal subgroups that differed in their level of agency, while the therapist sample was homogeneous in their interpersonal motives. Additionally, the second study showed that therapist trainees were lower in attachment avoidance than the matched reference sample. The interpersonal characteristics of counselor and therapist trainees were relevant for their perception of the therapeutic process and are thus likely to influence their interaction style with callers or patients. The dissertation studies therefore support the importance of interpersonal therapist characteristics for counseling and psychotherapy and call for future research in this domain to better understand their long-term impact.