Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction in Psychotherapy is Associated with Fewer Early Terminations

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BACKGROUND

• According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others, is essential for optimal development and mental health. The three needs, as they apply to psychological treatment, are:
  - Autonomy: client’s internal perceived locus of causality for treatment
  - Competence: client’s sense of efficacy in completing autonomously selected goals
  - Relatedness: client’s sense of being cared for and connected with the other

• There is a paucity of research on the importance of needs satisfaction within the psychotherapy context, the individual relationship between the basic needs and working alliance variables, and the relationship between need satisfaction in psychotherapy and early termination from therapy.

METHOD

Participants
• 87 undergraduate students from the University of Waterloo were recruited to participate
• Participants met criteria for the study if they had undergone individual psychotherapy since beginning high school
• Participants included 17 males and 69 females, and one participant who declined to answer, aged M=20.62, SD=3.09

Procedure
• Eligible participants completed an interview regarding their retrospective sense of basic psychological needs satisfaction in therapy, working alliance with their therapist, status at termination (i.e., planned vs. unplanned), and reasons for ending therapy.
  - Planned Ending: client discussed ending therapy with their therapist and termination was mutually agreed upon;
  - Unplanned Ending: client had not discussed ending therapy with their therapist and termination was unilateral

Measures
• Basic Needs Satisfaction in Psychotherapy (BNSP; adapted from Basic Needs Satisfaction in Relationships scale; LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000)
• Working Alliance Inventory – Short Revised (WAI-SR) (Hatcher & Gillaspy, 2006)

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Analyses
• Overall self-reported needs satisfaction in psychotherapy was correlated positively with overall self-reported working alliance
• While all subscales from both measures and total measure ratings were significantly correlated:
  - BNSP subscales display superior factorial distinctiveness as indicated by lower correlations among the subscales
  - Task, bond, and goal subscales on the WAI-SF seem to be indistinguishable

Comparison of the correlations between BNSP subscales with the WAI-SF total scale suggest that the WAI is mainly measuring satisfaction of relatedness needs

BNSP and WAI-SF were both moderately negatively skewed, indicating overall satisfaction with the therapy process retrospectively

• t-tests indicated that:
  - Higher overall ratings of basic needs satisfaction were associated with significantly fewer early terminations
  - Client subscale ratings of autonomy and competence were somewhat higher for planned enders (p = .07), and relatedness was significantly higher for planned enders (p = .004)
  - Client ratings of working alliance were significantly higher for planned enders compared to unplanned enders (p < .001)

Conclusions
• Results are based on a retrospective interview with a self-selecting sample. Future research should examine these variables prospectively.
• Higher participant ratings of basic needs satisfaction and working alliance were associated with fewer dropouts.
• Working alliance and needs satisfaction variables (particularly bond) were highly correlated. It is likely that the working alliance and basic needs measures are tapping into similar constructs.
  - However, subscales of the WAI-SF are so highly intercorrelated that they are practically indistinguishable. Comparatively, BNSP subscales are more distinct from each other and this measure may be capturing a wider breadth of therapist and client interaction.