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Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences

DOCTORAL THESIS

The effectiveness of emotionally focused therapy: emotional connection, couple satisfaction and forgiveness

ABSTRACT

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NOTE

This study is the result of a research supported financially by the Operational Sectoral Programme: Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, within the project POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132400, entitled “Successful Young Researchers – professional development in an interdisciplinary and international context”

The study focuses on the subject of emotional connection through forgiveness that is occasioned by a romantic relationship, as well as the relationships between connection, forgiveness and the satisfaction of the partners in a couple. The theoretical and practical approaches are conducted by fructifying the conceptual directions and the working principles of emotionally focused therapy (EFT). The conceptual and interventional basis of emotionally focused therapy puts forward the achievements brought in by the study of the emotional processes taking place in the context of interpersonal relations and, in particular, romantic interactions (Johnson, 2008). One of the abilities that are likely to help a couple go through the tensed situations consists in emotional flexibility which, in the relational context of the couple, can be translated through the ability to forgive one's partner when (s)he engages in a behaviour that is likely to harm the couple. This aspect is valorised by the emotionally focused approach, in an effort to explain the concept of attachment injuries. For the therapists specialised in emotionally focused therapy, attachment injuries healing represents the best way to increase the flexibility of the negative interaction patterns and foster emotional reconnection (Johnson, 2008).

Although the emotional connection and the healing of attachment injuries through forgiveness evolved as conceptual and interventional benchmarks for the practitioners in the field of emotionally focused therapy to date, as far as we know, no studies were conducted to investigate the relationships between them and couple satisfaction. The present study proposes a quantitative and interventional approach, which were aimed at highlighting the mechanisms through which the emotional reconnection of the partners in a couple leads to the increase in their satisfaction level.

CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS

The study is structured into eight chapters; the first four have a mainly conceptual character, while the rest rely on a more practical approach. The first chapter deals with the significance, the role and the peculiarities of experiencing and expressing emotions. The focus of this chapter consisted in alexithymia. In the second study, this dimension was linked to the process of forgiveness which occurs in the couple relationship and to emotional connection. *Chapter 1* brings proof regarding the relations between alexithymia, the romantic attachment and satisfaction towards the couple's life. *Chapter 2* particularises

the dynamics of the emotional processes occurring within the couple's life – framework that facilitates the expression of emotions and, thus, the enrichment of the individual and interpersonal experiences of the partners. Three key concepts included in the research theme are approached, namely emotional connection, romantic attachment and forgiveness conceived as a constructive way that contributes to overcoming the problems occurring in a couple's life. A few models of the process of forgiveness are reviewed, with a focus on the paradigm used in the emotionally focused therapy. *Chapter 3* delimits the significances of the satisfaction regarding the couple relationship, identifying the links between this dimension and other highly investigated constructs, as well as the quality of the marital relationship, marital adjustment or the feeling of happiness. Considering the global conceptual context of the paper, the chapter summarises empirical evidence for the relationships between the satisfaction provided by the couple life and alexithymia, the romantic attachment style, respectively forgiveness. *Chapter 4* focuses on highlighting the conceptual and practical coordinates of the emotionally focused therapy. The historical anchors of this approach are equally reviewed, as well as the principles and the map of the therapeutic process reuniting a few stages and steps. Moreover, an inventory of the main tasks and interventions is gathered, as well as of the studies that bring empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the emotionally focused therapy.

Study I

Validating the questionnaire in order to assess the emotional connection

Theoretical premises

One of the concepts that constituted the subject of our study is emotional connection. Suggested in the context of the emotionally focused therapy, this concept describes a set of processes, mechanisms and ends, depending on which the dynamics of a romantic relation can change dramatically, either in a negative or in a positive way (Johnson, 2008, 2004). Emotional connection is not synonym with the concept of romantic attachment. However, between the two constructs there is a functional link; that is, a secured attachment style facilitates the preservation of the emotional link between two partners at desirable levels (Johnson, 2008). Emotional connection provides couple therapists with a constructive way of conceptualising and shaping romantic relationships, since it is based on a positive perspective on the couple's functioning. The emotional connection dimensions

(accessibility, availability and involvement) were studied separately and indirectly, by means of a set of related constructs, such as: self-disclosure (Laureanceau, Feldman-Barrett and Pietromonaco, 1998), empathy (Hatch, 2008) or emotional closeness (Bercheid, Snyder and Omoto, 2004).

Aim of the study

The emotionally focused therapeutic practice encourages the co-exploration of the emotional experiences by the partners. To this purpose, the AREQ instrument was developed and used (Jonson, 2008). Although the questionnaire is used by many practitioners in the US, it is less known in Europe. Moreover, until recently, AREQ has not made the object of any formal exploration approach of psychometric qualities. Therefore, the first study we conducted was aimed at testing the factorial structure, the construct validity and the (concurrent) criterion validity, respectively at assessing the fidelity of the Romanian version of the AREQ instrument.

Methodology and results

The psychometric data resulted from the treatment of the answers that the 258 adults (129 women and 129 men of 75 marital couples, respectively 54 non-marital couples) provided for AREQ, as well as other instruments administered with a view to assess the construct and concurrent validity. Besides AREQ, the participants also filled in: a) an alexithymia assessment scale (*Toronto Alexithymia Scale/ TAS*; Bagby, Parker and Taylor, 1994); b) *The Experiences in Close Relationship-Revised/ ECR-R* (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt and Vogel, 2007), for the assessment of the unsecured romantic attachment style and c) the sub-scale for the assessment of the satisfaction towards the current romantic relationship, taken from *The Investment Model Scale/ IMS* (Rusbult, Martz and Agnew, 1998)

The (internal) construct validity was assessed by testing two hypothetical measurement models; the data provided by the confirmatory factorial analysis highlight a satisfying statistical adequacy both for the model with a single latent factor (and the errors for the two items correlated between them), as well as for the three inter-correlated latent factors model. However, for the other two studies, the first model was used, due to the fact that the relationships between the three factors pointed to their psychometric and conceptual overlapping.

The high levels of the internal coherence (estimated both for the total sample, and for women and men) testify to the fidelity of the Romanian version of the AREQ instrument.

The correlations between the AREQ and TAS (alexithymia) scores, respectively ECR-R (attachment style) constitute other proofs of the construct validity of the Romanian version. For the anxious and avoidant attachment styles, the correlations with the score for the emotional connection acquired the expected sense and moderate intensity, suggesting the fact that the dimension referring to the emotional connection is a different construct compared to the attachment style. The more modest correlation with alexithymia can be explained through the fact that, while alexithymia subsumes a set of abilities in terms of identifying and expressing emotions in the general context of the individual functioning, emotional connection represents an interpersonal process, which can be facilitated by the ability to work with one's own emotions. The AREQ score was associated positively with age and negatively with the experience in the romantic relationship, although the intensity of the connections was more modest.

The criterion (concurrent) validity was assessed by correlating the AREQ scores with one of the criteria the most frequently used for the assessment of the romantic couple functionality, that is, satisfaction. The associations followed the expected direction and had moderate intensity, suggesting the facilitating role that connection has in relation to the state of wellness within the couple. Moreover, besides the strong predictive role of the avoidant attachment, the AREQ score was a predictor both for the satisfaction in relation to the involvement of the life partner in answering the need for intimacy, and for the overall satisfaction. These results provide evidence for the incremental validity of the AREQ instrument, suggesting that the assessment of emotional connection can bring therapists an informational gain in specific approaches they undergo.

Study II

Romantic attachment, alexithymia and satisfaction within the couple: the mediating role of emotional connection and forgiveness

Theoretical premises

Through its psychological content, alexithymia covers a cluster of cognitive features which includes the difficulty to identify, describe and communicate one's own emotions and feelings towards other people, to which is added the externally-oriented thinking

(oriented towards the outside) and the limitation of the imagination abilities in the emotional plan.

Attachment represents one of the deeply emotional experiences. It is conceptualised as an emotional link between two people, based on a feeling of safety and comfort (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2007). For an adult, the romantic attachment originates in the early emotional experiences underwent during childhood with the primary attachment figure (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Three styles of romantic attachment have been described, namely secured, avoidant and anxious. Their psychological content is differentiated depending on the working models regarding the self and the relationships with the primary attachment figure. Various researches have pointed to the benefits that the secured attachment has as regards the individual and interpersonal functioning (Feeney, 2007, 1999; Muraru and Turliuc, 2013).

According to McCullough and Pargament (2000), the construct referring to forgiveness involves both a personal dimension (since the process itself contributes to changing the way in which a person who forgives another person who caused an emotional thinks, feels – emotionally speaking – and behaves), as well as an interpersonal dimension. The negative aspects of the process of forgiveness (e.g. avoidance or revenge) tend to be positively correlated with the interpersonal aggressiveness of the partners of a marital couple, and negatively associated with their satisfaction towards the relationship they have (Finchman and Beach, 2002; Paleari, Regalia and Finchman, 2003).

Aim of the study

Building on the positive results that the practitioners in the field of emotionally focused therapy obtain in working with the couples they assist, as well as the results of the studies highlighting the benefits that the process of forgiveness brings to the mental activity of the individuals and generally to the life of the couple, the study we conducted was aimed at testing a model of the individual and interpersonal factors facilitating the process of forgiveness in a romantic couple, as well as the satisfaction of partners.

Methodology and results

The database included protocols with the valid answers for a number of 204 adults aged between 18 and 54. The participants formed a number of 102 couples, 43 of which were non-marital and 59 were marital. The questionnaires administered to the participants

included: a) the questionnaire on demographic data and information regarding the relationship status; b) the Toronto scale for assessing alexithymia; c) the questionnaire for assessing the emotional connection of the couple partners; d) ECR-R - for assessing the romantic attachment styles; e) a scale for assessing the forgiveness dimensions occurring in the couple's life (*The Family Forgiveness Scale-Primary Relationship/* FFS; Pollard, Anderson, Anderson and Jennings, 1998) and f) the IMS subscale for assessing the satisfaction regarding the current relationship with the life partner.

The hypothetical models of the relationships between the variables measured were tested using the structural equation modelling and the dyadic unit analysis. In order to test the relationships between the individual and interpersonal factors facilitating the process of forgiveness in a couple, as well as the partners' satisfaction, we resorted to the *Actor Partner Interdependence Model/* APIM (Kenny, Kashy and Cook, 2006).

Both for women and for their partners, their own emotional connection had a positive effect on the satisfaction of their partner. Conversely, only in the case of women, their own emotional connection had a positive effect on their own satisfaction. When during the analysis, the behaviours oriented towards forgiveness were introduced as possible mediators in both men and women, they partially mediated the relationship between the emotional connection of the life partners and their own satisfaction. However, the forgiving behaviours of men covered a much higher percentage of the total effect that the emotional connection of their life partners had on the satisfaction of men. This result is confirmed by the therapists' observations (Bradley and Furrow, 2007; Wooley and Johnson, 2005), according to whom, the partners with a stronger sense of "criticism" (usually women) need more time to engage in the therapeutic labour and accept the fact that the other partner's change in attitude (usually displaying an avoidant attachment) is real. At the same time, once engaged emotionally in the therapeutic process, the avoidant partner is considerably more stimulated by the changes observed in his/ her partner (for instance, acceptance, empathy, reduced aggressiveness), which stimulates his/ her involvement in the process of forgiveness and, thus, makes him/ her feel more satisfied with the relationship.

According to one of the hypotheses which served as a basis for our study, the emotional connection of each of the partners of a couple mediates the relationship between the individual's own attachment or that of the partner and the satisfaction towards the romantic relationship. The data obtained partially confirmed this hypothesis, namely only for the effects actor-partner, by means of the emotional connection of each of the actors,

respectively actor-actor, by means of the emotional connection of the partner. The emotional connection of the women partially mediated the relationship between their anxious attachment and the partners' satisfaction, a similar result being obtained for the emotional connection in men, which partially mediated the relation between their avoidant attachment and their partners' satisfaction. In the case of women, the mediation effect was more important; this result was supported by the higher proportion (of the total effect that attachment had on the satisfaction of the other partner) that the indirect effect covered. These results reconfirm the role that the emotional connection has in the therapeutic process for both partners, and highlights the fact that the desire for emotional closeness and emotional comfort represents a universal attachment need. The results are relevant for the emotionally focused therapeutic practice, since it reflects two of the major changing events, namely the re-engagement in the relationship of the avoidant partner – usually the man – and the “taming” of the critical partner – usually the woman (Wooley and Johnson, 2005). On the other hand, the higher proportion that the emotional connection in men covered of the total effect that their avoidant effect had on the satisfaction of women could be explained by the stereotypes regarding the gender roles which induce different expectations to the partners of a couple.

Another significant result consisted in the mediating role that the emotional connection of each actor had in the relation between the attachment style of the partner and his satisfaction. The mediation effect provided by the emotional connection of men on the relation between the anxious attachment and the satisfaction of their partners was much more important, compared to the mediation role played by the women's emotional connection. The result reiterates the explanation offered in the discussion above regarding gender roles. On the other hand, the results suggest that, in the context of a romantic relationship, the emotional connection of avoidant men has a strong effect on the satisfaction of their anxious partners, through the fact that it answers their needs of closeness and comfort. For the avoidant men, this need is less pregnant compared to the need that their life partner trust and appraise them.

For the combination between the avoidant attachment in women and the anxious attachment in their partners, the data of the multi-varied modelling has put forward four mediation relations, three of which had as a mediator the emotional connection in women. Thus, the emotional connection in women mediated both the relationship between the avoidant attachment in women and the satisfaction of their partners, and the relationship between the anxious attachment of the partners and the women's own satisfaction.

Additionally, the emotional connection of the women partially mediated the relationship between the anxious attachment and the partners' satisfaction. These results suggest that the closeness of the women (displaying an avoidant attachment) offers the anxious partners the state of comfort they need, the confidence they are wanted in the relationship, which makes them lower their defence mechanisms (they reduce their criticism), by means of the mechanisms of circularity.

Study III

The Role of emotion-centred therapy in facilitating forgiveness, increasing emotional connection and satisfaction within the couple

Theoretical premises

The main concepts used in the emotionally focused approach are (Greenberg and Johnson, 1988; Johnson, 2004): romantic attachment, emotional connection, sensitivities, attachment injuries, separation stress, vulnerability, healthy dependence, etc. The emotionally focused therapists project and apply their work tasks starting from the premise that the safety of the emotional connection between the partners of a couple involves emotional connection and lays the bases of intimacy. Enriching the emotional experiences constitutes one of the therapists' objectives, in order to facilitate intra-individual change and transform the relationship (Johnson, 2008).

The therapeutic interventions realised on marital couples, which also included undergoing a process of forgiveness, led to an increase in the partners' level of satisfaction, besides the improvement in the quality of communication and the increase in the level of emotional intimacy (Alvaro, 2001). In the context of the emotionally focused therapy, we proposed a validated model for solving attachment injuries (Makinen and Johnson, 2006), which includes four interconnected steps: determining the attachment indicators, differentiating between the emotions, rearrangements within the relationship, respectively forgiveness and reconciliation. The model was valorised in the interventional study conducted.

Aim of the study

Building on the results obtained in the second study, the working principles, the methods and the intervention techniques used in the emotionally focused therapy, as well

as the experience of the author of the present study in assisting the couples that are faced with difficulties, the first study was aimed at assessing the impact that the emotionally focused couple therapy, by means of the techniques directed at the emotional reconnection and healing the attachment injuries, has in terms of the satisfaction of the couple partners.

Methodology and results

The group on which the emotionally focused therapeutic intervention was conducted included 17 marital or non-marital couples recruited among the couples requesting assistance from the couple and family psychotherapy medical practice of the author of the present study. The interventional *mixed-design* study was conducted during three stages, as follows: a) the *pre-therapy stage*, during which part of the couples recruited *à la longue* filled in (after the first session) the AREQ, FSS and IMS instruments; b) the *therapeutic stage*, during which each couple underwent the therapeutic program specific to the emotionally focused therapy – a number of 12-13 sessions, each directed according to specific objectives; c) the *post-therapeutic stage*, during which the assisted couples filled in again the AREQ, FSS and IMS instruments, in order to obtain the quantitative indicators of the therapeutic progress; d) *the follow-up stage* – four months after the therapeutic sessions, the participant couples were telephoned and asked to fill in again the AREQ, FSS and IMS instruments. The partners in the control sample filled in the same instruments twice, at an interval of four months. During this period, they did not require any kind of therapeutic help from the author of the present study, or from any other specialist.

According to the first hypothesis, the emotionally focused therapy leads to an increase in the emotional connection between the partners of a couple. Comparing the averages obtained before and immediately after the therapy highlighted an increased size of the effect. Four months after the end of the therapy, the level of the emotional connection remained high. These results express the positive impact that therapy had in terms of the emotional connection of the partners in the assisted couples. The path underwent by the assisted couples during the therapy sessions was predominantly emotional. In comparison with other approaches, the *emotional processing* occurring in the context of the emotionally focused therapy contributes to creating a different atmosphere, compared to the orientation towards the negotiation behaviours or the search of solutions to the problems the couples complain about, and which are specific to other approaches. Within this context, the main objective we held in view was to reshape the *emotional tone of the relationship*. By means of specific techniques (for instance: validation, circular

questions, accentuation, evocative questions, deepening emotions and the expression of the attachment fears), we intended to change the emotional experiences of the couples, orienting them from the insecure towards the secure, from fear to trust. In a relationship, nothing works better than the certainty that you are desired, that you have an impact upon the other person, and that you are able to answer efficiently to the other person's needs (Johnson, 2008; Johnson et al., 2005). This is the essence of emotional connection.

Moreover, the comparative data obtained supported the second hypothesis, according to which the emotionally focused therapy contributes to the intensification of the processes of forgiveness in the couples presenting attachment injuries. For this dependent variable, the size of the effect associated to the comparison pre-therapy vs. post-therapy was the most consistent. Moreover, the measurement conducted in the *follow-up stage* highlighted a minor fluctuation of the score on forgiveness, compared to the average recorded immediately after the therapy.

The data obtained supported empirically the third hypothesis. Thus, emotional reconnection by healing the attachment injuries was also reflected in terms of the satisfaction that the partners reported both immediately after the therapy (the score average significantly higher than the one recorded initially), as well as four months after the treatment.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study contributes to enriching the literature in the field of couple psychology and couple psychotherapy, by providing conceptual and practical guidelines, which will hopefully raise the interest of researchers and practitioners. One of the most important *theoretical and conceptual* contributions consists in the presentation of the construct referring to the emotional connection seen as a significant experience for the partners of a romantic couple. Emotional connection represents one of the cores of the conceptual basis on which the emotionally focused therapy draws (Johnson, 2008). As far as we know, the Romanian literature on couple psychology, psychological counselling and psychotherapy, lacks studies on emotional connection.

The second study presented in our research obtained significant evidence on two of the conceptual models tested, namely: a) a model through which we supposed that the answers that the partners of a couple manifest during the process of forgiveness mediates the relationship between emotional connection and relationship satisfaction and b) a model

though which we supposed that the dimension referring to the emotional connection of the partners of a couple mediates the relationship between the romantic attachment of the partners and their satisfaction. The study conducted has two main advantages. The first consists in the fact that the unit of analysis was the couple, covering a methodological requirement emphasised by Chung (1990). The life of a romantic couple has a strong interpersonal and transactional impact. In a daily life context, the partners interact dynamically and continuously in terms of communication, intimacy, expression and adjustment of their own emotions, as well as in the plan of sexual relations. On the other hand, the identities and the relational and emotional experiences of a couple are the result of the choices they make and the behaviours they display. The second advantage consists in the use of the model of the actor-partner interdependence (Kenny, Kashy and Cook, 2006), a quantitative data analysis paradigm, increasingly preferred by the researchers in the field of romantic relations psychology. This methodological approach starts from the premise that the partners of a romantic couple have their own individual characteristics and past experiences and, at the same time, they influence each other, in other words, they are interdependent.

The second study represents a first attempt – in the Romanian space – in which the concept of emotional connection was related to the dynamic process of forgiveness occurring in the life of a couple and, through it, the partners' satisfaction. The relations identified provide the practitioners in the field of emotionally focused therapy with answers to the questions occasioned by the work with a variety of couples, as well as conceptual clarifications.

In terms of the *methodology* used, the research conducted provides evidence on the validity and concept validity, as well as the fidelity to the Romanian version of the AREQ instrument. In order to provide the researchers and the practitioners in the field of couple psychotherapy with an instrument we consider useful in the clinical attempt to collect relevant information to explain the difficulties met by the partners of a couple, we translated the AREQ instrument into Romanian. The data obtained from our research suggests that, for AREQ, the single-latent-factor measurement model represents a better psychometric alternative compared to the three-factor model. Therefore, in the context of the scientific studies, we recommend the use of the AREQ instrument, as a one-dimensional measure for the emotional connection between the partners of a romantic couple.

Empirical analysis The third study was aimed at emphasising the role that emotionally focused therapy has in facilitating the process of forgiveness and, through it, in healing attachment injuries, increasing emotional connection and the satisfaction of the partners of a couple. In Romania, no study was conducted and published on the assessment of the emotionally focused therapy effectiveness. The interventional study (based on a treatment – control design with repeated measurements) we conducted represents the first attempt of the kind in the Romanian space.