

Utility of the SOFTA behavioral coding measures and Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale in assessing couple outcome and session rating

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Abstract

This pilot study examined the relationship between the SOFTA behavioral coding family measure, the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Outcome Rating Scale/ Session Rating Scale. The utility of the measures is further defined by examining relationships between measures. The RDAS and SOFTA measure were predictive of the ORS and SRS at Session #2 and Session #5. In particular ratings of the couples' safety, couples' rating of shared sense of purpose, rating of therapists' emotional engagement and rating of therapists' shared sense of purpose were consistently predictive of session rating and outcome.

Introduction

The therapeutic alliance is important in couples therapy, but can be more difficult to understand and build due to the clinician needing to develop alliances with more than one individual (Rait, 2000). Clinicians must monitor the interactions within the triad so the clinician understands how his or her interactions with one member of the triad affects the other. Key factors in understanding therapeutic alliance for couple therapy are often elusive for therapists and researchers. Understanding various measures of early-treatment satisfaction and therapeutic alliance help researchers and clinicians better define important predictors in treating couples.

Method

The sample is 42 adult partners seeking couples therapy through a University counseling center research study.

Outcome measure: Outcome Rating Scale (ORS; Miller & Duncan, 2004): A self-report measure administered at the beginning of every session to assess psychological functioning and distress of the couple as it relates to presenting concerns. The ORS measure for session number two (first therapy session after intake) is used for the current study. The ORS is a four-item instrument that offers a visual analog of client's functioning in four areas: individually (personal well-being), interpersonally (family, couple, close relationships), socially (work, school, friendships), and overall (general sense of well-being). The total score ranges from 0 to 40, with lower scores signifying greater amount of distress (Anker et al., 2010). Miller et al. (2003) have reported internal consistency on ORS of .93 and test-retest reliability was .66. The cutoff on the ORS to indicate a person's level of dysfunction is 25 (Miller et al., 2003).

Outcome measure: Session Rating Scale (SRS; Duncan et al., 2003): A measure of the alliance between the client and the therapist. It is administered at the end of every session but the SRS measure for session number two is used for this study. It is also a four-item visual analog scale based on Bordin's (1979) explanation of the components of the therapeutic alliance, which are the relational bond and the degree of agreement between the client and the therapist about the goals and tasks of therapy (Anker et al., 2010, p. 638). Clients are directed to rate the clinician on the each of the following items: relationships with the therapist (felt heard, understood and respected), goals and topics (worked on and talked about what I client wanted), approach or method (therapist's approach is good fit with client), and overall (overall session was right, nothing was missing). Client scores all four dimensions, which gives a total score from 0 to 40, with a cutoff score of 36. If score falls below 36 there exists a greater risk for poor outcomes (Miller & Duncan, 2004).

Predictor Measures: SOFTA Behavioral Coding. One measure to monitor the multiple relationships is the System for Observing Family Therapy Alliance (SOFTA; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington, 2006). This measure is a behavioral rating of a session of couples therapy for the couples and the therapist on four dimensions: (a) Engagement in the therapeutic process, (b) Emotional connection with the therapist, (c) Safety within the therapeutic system, and (d) Shared sense of purpose within the family (Friedlander et al., 2006). Each dimension has a list of possible positive and negative behaviors which are then converted to a number rating from extremely problematic (-3) to extremely strong (+3). The SOFTA has been tested for content validity through a sorting task (Friedlander et al., 2006). The SOFTA rating of the couple and therapist for session number two and five is used for this study. Interrater reliability for this measure has not yet been completed.

Predictor Measures: Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale. (RDAS; Busby, Christensen, Crane & Larson, 1995) is a 14-item version of the gold standard DAS measure. This brief version is useful for a single score indicator of couple functioning and has been studied for reliability and validity with good results in a variety of samples and labs (Crane, Middleton & Bean, 2000). The RDAS score is obtained at the first session as a baseline of relationship functioning.

Results

Table 1
Results of Analyses of Partner SOFTA behavioral coding (N=42)

	β Session #2 Rating Scale Measure	β Outcome Rating Scale Measure at Session #2	β Session #5 Rating Scale Measure	β Outcome Rating Scale Measure at Session #5
Overall Regression Result	$R^2 = .94$	$R^2 = .66$	$R^2 = .72$	$R^2 = .76$
Baseline Dyadic Adjustment (RDAS)	-.10	-.38	-.49	.09
SOFTA-Engagement in the therapeutic process	.24	.12	.47	.22
SOFTA- Emotional connection with the therapist	.13	-.11	-.37	.27
SOFTA- Safety within the therapeutic system	-.25	-.25	.22	.07
SOFTA- Shared sense of purpose within the family	.78	.38	.77	.29
SOFTA Therapist engagement rating	-.15	-.33	-.51	-.47
SOFTA Therapist emotional connection with family	.40	.46	.98	.47
SOFTA Therapist safety	-.17	-.20	.14	.09
SOFTA Therapist shared sense of purpose	-.40	-.47	.52	.18

Discussion

Results of this study indicate that there are predictable relationships between various measures of couple functioning in early treatment with some promise for predicting outcomes. The sample is small, and in need of replication. However, there are implications if the results hold true in future studies. The observational ratings of the couples alliance with each other was more powerful at predicting couple functioning at session two than the therapist's alliance with the partners. Given the complexity of the triad in couples therapy, this provides support for the concept that the couples dyad may be more important to session success than therapist actions. In addition, the observational measure of shared sense of purpose had a stronger ability to predict the couples' self-rating of the session than expected. It may be that this measure is more strongly related to session success and therapeutic outcome than other measures of couple functioning.