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Themes of Experience in the Treatment of Psychosis: Relationship Anecdote Interviews with Therapeutic Staff

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Learning Goal:

The presentation introduces the use of relationship anecdote interviews with clinicians as an innovative method to study the relational aspects of psychosis. Learning goals include an understanding of the method and its foundations, possible research applications, and first results from an ongoing study.

Abstract Text:

Current diagnostic categories for psychosis have repeatedly been criticized for their lack in clinical usefulness and their stigmatizing nature. A major gap in our knowledge of psychosis is that we do not sufficiently understand the relational and affective dynamics associated with these conditions. Therefore, authors from the phenomenological and psychoanalytic traditions (e.g. Atwood, 2012) have proposed to map psychotic disorders not in terms of symptoms but in terms of content and themes of experience. In order to implement and test such an approach, we introduce a modified version of the relationship anecdote interview as a method to assess and group themes of experience as they manifest within therapeutic relationships.

The relationship anecdote interview has originally been introduced to psychotherapy research by Luborsky (1990). During a 30-50-minute interview, a person tells several relationship episodes. These are narratives about actual events in which an interaction with another person took place. For our research we conducted relationship anecdote interviews with different staff members in psychiatric and psychotherapeutic hospitals. Each interview focused on relationship episodes with one specific patient that had been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder. For each patient, three different staff members were interviewed.

We transcribed the interviews and performed a qualitative content analysis to assess which reoccurring themes therapists and nursing staff had experienced in relationship with a given patient. Further aggregation of the data across N = 12 patients (n = 36 interviews) with different psychotic disorders led to a first tentative typology of themes of experience in relationship with patients with psychotic disorders. We believe that developing and elaborating such a typology further can facilitate our understanding of the interpersonal dynamics in the treatment of psychosis and thereby contribute to a more comprehensive clinical model of these disorders.

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