



Description and First Steps Toward the Empirical Validation of the Plan Formulation Method for Couples

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to empirically assess the reliability of the plan formulation method for couples, a procedure for formulating the case, planning, and monitoring the couple therapies according to control-mastery theory. We hypothesized that when couples are looking for couple therapy, they have an *unconscious couple's plan* for the therapy, which includes the *couple's goals*; the *pathogenic beliefs* that the partners want to disprove; the *traumas* from which these beliefs originated and that the partners want to master; the *vicious relational circles* that make the couple suffer and that the couple wants to break; the *virtuous relational circles* that are expressions of the couple's resources and that the couple wants to fuel; and the *relational insights* that may help the couple get better. Our study involved 15 couples treated by four experienced therapists. Four raters independently formulated each couple's plan based on the first three sessions following a standard procedure, and we calculated the intraclass correlation for pooled judges' ratings. For a subsample of three couples—who before and after treatment had completed the dyadic adjustment scale (DAS) and the outcome questionnaire-45.2 (OQ-45.2)—the compatibility of the therapists' interventions with the couples' and partners' plans was assessed. The relationship between the ratings of compatibility, DAS and OQ-45.2, was assessed. The results showed excellent interjudge reliability for each couple's plan formulation (average ICC = 0.82), attesting to the validity of the procedure; and preliminary data on the therapeutic process suggested that therapists' interventions compatible with couple's plans could help partners achieve good outcomes.

Keywords Couple therapy · Plan formulation method for couples · Control-mastery theory · Change mechanisms · Process-outcome study

Introduction

Research studies and reviews on the outcomes of couple therapy (Carr, 2019; Gurman et al., 2015) have demonstrated its efficacy, even regarding individual disorders that often occur with couples' conflicts (Barbato & D'Avanzo, 2020). Several studies have found that integrative approaches that focus on the connections between current difficulties and past experiences, rather than just on the here and now of a couple's difficulties, guarantee more stable and longer-lasting improvements (Christensen & Doss, 2017). Unfortunately, process research in couples therapy, which is essential for identifying the active factors or change mechanisms of successful therapies, is currently underdeveloped (D'Aniello & Fife, 2020).

Another area of great importance in the field of couple therapy research concerns the construction and validation of tools that guide researchers and therapists in their assessment of a couple's functioning and problems and in

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