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Summary

Working Alliance with Mandated Clients. A Research in Probation Supervision

This research project on working alliance with mandated clients seeks to find an answer on the following main question: what specific characteristics of working alliance with mandated clients are relevant for stagnation, continuity or drop out in one-to-one supervision in probation? In general, working alliance is defined as the quality of the goal-orientated collaboration between clients and professionals. In research publications on working alliance there is a general agreement about characteristics and relevance of working alliance for therapy or social work in voluntary contexts. However, the research tradition on this theme for working with delinquent clients in mandated contexts is young and findings are not consistent yet.

Design

For this research project a theoretical model was designed, wherein potential specific characteristics of working alliance with mandated clients were placed in the context of other active factors for the results of probation-supervision, such as characteristics of probationers, probation-officers (PO's) and the judicial context. Working alliance was assessed by a set of inventories: an internationally used and frequently validated inventory for working alliance in voluntary contexts and an internationally used inventory designed for care in mandated contexts, supplemented with new items for measurement of the theoretically assumed characteristics. Outcomes were: stagnations within supervision (such as no show by probationers and warnings by the probation-officer), drop-out and re-arrest. After several pilots, a sample was drawn of 267 dyads of probationers and probation-officers, following the cohort-method and some inclusion-criteria. The research group of probationers represented significantly more low-risk and less high-risk clients than the comparable population. The research- group of probation-officers (PO) was representative. The dyads were interviewed twice, at the start and six-nine months later. Analysis was done following two sub questions and include correlations between 1e) the assumed active factors in the theoretical model and characteristics of working alliance with mandated clients and 2e) between the working alliance and outcomes. Based on the many variables, inside and outside the model, with possible relevance for results of probation, only small effects from the working alliance were to be expected. To find suitable factors for working alliance, for both proba-

tioners and probation-officers and for two waves, all items went through a procedure of selection, structuring and control. This procedure resulted in four factors, with the restriction that one of these factors (reactance) did not fit the criteria for sufficient internal consistence (.50). The final model of items and factors is called 'working-alliance inventory for mandated clients'. This inventory measures: Trust, Goals and Restriction, Bond and Reactance. For probation-officers, Contra-reactance (emotional response on clients reactance) was also measured, in three individual items.

Findings

The group probationers reports on average high levels of appreciation of the working alliance with their probation-officers. This might be affected by the unmeant selection-effect in the research-group or social desirability. Reports of the group probation-officers are more moderate. The biggest differences between both perspectives are observed at their ratings of Trust and Reactance.

Following the first sub-question of the study, working alliance according to probationers appears to correlate weakly positive with age, having a job and living with partner of children, weakly negative with risk-profile, previous detention and previous supervision and moderately positive with their perception of previous probation-interventions. Probationers with substance abuse report slightly lower working alliance-rates. Probationers report slightly higher alliance-rates with probation-officers who are female or older than 30. Working alliance according to probationers correlates weakly to moderately positive (depending on the specific alliance-characteristics) with internal regulation / motivation. Furthermore, a positive development over time corresponds with increasing internal motivation and decreasing amotivation, and vice versa. Working alliance according to probation-officers does not correlate with their demographic characteristics, except a lower rate on contra-reactance from PO's with more working experience. When PO's perceive their client (in the researched dyad) as more difficult than average, or when they feel less competent with these client, they averagely tend to report lower appreciation of the working alliance. Their rates are slightly higher with female clients and lower with young-adults and with moderate to high and high risk probationers. A weak negative correlation was found between clients amotivation and working alliance, especially with the alliance-characteristic Goals and Restriction. Furthermore, increasing amotivation correlates with PO's decreasing alliance rates over time.

Following the second sub-question of the study, correlations between working alliance and outcomes are first analyzed from both perspectives separately, followed by analysis from a combined perspective. From probationers' perspective more Trust correlates weakly negative with stagnations and

drop-out. More Goals and Restriction and more Reactance correlates weakly positive with stagnation. From PO's perspective the correlations include all four alliance-characteristics. When stagnations in supervision occur, PO's also reported less Trust and Bond and more Reactance. The same pattern is seen when drop - out occurs, but in that case PO's also report less Goals and Restrictions. From a combined perspective a bigger absolute difference between PO and client in Trust, Reactance and later also Bond, seems to go together with more stagnations in supervision. Furthermore, a bigger difference in Trust correlates with more drop-out. Correlations with outcomes after six-nine months are stronger than at the start. Analyzed separately, the outcomes seem to differentiate for PO's more than for probationers. However, in the combined model, the strength of correlations appears to be equal for both perspectives. From a combined perspective, generally spoken more Bond and / or Trust decreases the chance of the negative form of the outcomes, while more Reactance (according to the PO) increases this chance. More Goals and Restriction correlates with more stagnations, but only in combination with more Reactance as perceived by the PO,

Strong elements of this research are the inclusion of 276 dyads, the assessment and analysis from two perspectives and in two time waves. Limitations of this research include the outcome measures, formulated only from a formal probation perspective (for reasons explained in the design), the deviation in representativeness in the sample of probationers and the high level of clients ratings, suggesting a considerable social desirability. Furthermore the factor Reactance is not consistent enough from clients perspective and drop-out after the second wave (6-9 months after start) was only 8, so findings that include the second wave and this outcome are to be interpreted carefully.

In the discussion section it is suggested that further research should consider working alliance more consequently as a double sided construct, what could possibly lead to a model of factors that differs for both perspectives. Some concrete suggestions for further research are made. For probation practice suggestions are made for better integration of clients' perception of the working alliance in interventions and routines, as well as more attention to the importance of PO's perceptions. Findings suggest that probation-officers do not need to wait with communication of goals and restrictions 'until there is a good relationship with their client'. This communication should go together with investments in bond en trust. The working alliance with mandated clients integrates the importance and effectiveness of being clear on goals and restrictions with trustworthy and respectful treatment of clients.