Factors Influencing Social Workers' Relationship to Their Clients: A Test of Social Psychological Theories

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the application of general social psychological theories on the development of relationships between people (mere exposure effect, similarity-attraction effect, triangular theory of love) to the special case of the relationship between counselor and client. Two hundred and twenty-eight social workers from Germany took part in the online survey on their relationship with their clients. The results show that (1) the degree of familiarity with clients increases with the frequency of contact with them, (2) the degree of perceived similarity with clients increases with the quality of the relationship, and (3) social workers' tendency to experience romantic feelings toward clients is influenced by the desire for emotional and physical closeness and the willingness to form a long-term commitment. Finally, the implications of the results for shaping the relationship in social work are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Counselor-Client Relationship, Social Work, Mere Exposure Effect, Similarity-Attraction Effect, Triangular Theory of Love.*

INTRODUCTION

The great importance of the relationship with clients has been stressed many times in social work literature (e.g., Durst, 1994; Howe, 1998; Ruch, 2005; Murphy, Duggan & Joseph, 2013; Schmitz, 2013; Marc, Makai Dimény & Bacter, 2019; Kennedy, 2019; Klug et a., 2020; Rollins, 2020). In these publications, the establishment of a positive working relationship is understood as an essential element of social work practice as well as a relevant influencing factor for the promotion of change processes of clients. In 2019, the World Social Work Day of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) was thematically dedicated to relations between persons ("Promoting the importance of human relationships") and particularly emphasized the important role of the relationship between social workers and their clients (Mayer, 2019). There are many publications that normatively describe what an 'ideal' relationship with clients in social work should look like (e.g., Biestek, 1957; Chun-Sing Cheung, 2015), as well as guidelines from the IFSW (2018) on "Ethical

Principles and Professional Integrity" that outline how a relationship should not be formed - e.g., regarding normative transgressions such as dual relationships, where a professional relation and a private relation are given simultaneously (see Reamer, 2003; O'Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2013; Peterson, 1992).

On the other hand, there is a lack of publications in social work that have empirically examined and critically tested factors assumed to affect the relationships to clients (for an overview for the field of psychotherapy, see Lambert & Barley 2002). To address this gap, the present study was conceptualized in which a selection of factors expected to influence the social worker-client relationship is investigated among a sample of German social work practitioners. Since factors affecting the development of interpersonal relationships in everyday situations have been the

subject of intensive empirical research in social psychology for many decades (for a summary, see Jonas, Stroebe & Hewstone, 2014), the aim of the present study was to examine to what extent the relevance of these factors can be transferred from the field of everyday interpersonal relationships to the field of the working relationships between social workers and their clients. To this end, the following section first provides an overview of three prominent theories in social psychology that address empirically validated influences on relationship development. The hypotheses derived from these theories for the perception and shaping of relationships in social work are then tested in an empirical study with social workers in Germany.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

In everyday life, positive interpersonal relationships develop from an extreme point of initial strangeness, where there is no pronounced affiliation (sympathy, affection) between actors at the beginning, to intermediate stages of increased affiliation (like in acquaintance relationships and friendship relations), toward a second extreme point of highest affiliation, characterized by intense emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement of the actors, e.g., in partnership relations (Karremans & Finkenauer, 2023). Based on these different stages in the development of positive interpersonal affiliation in human relations, i.e., strangeness, acquaintance, friendship and partnership, the following three social psychological theories will be addressed, which relate to the emergence of three important features of interpersonal relations: the development of familiarity, attraction, and romantic feelings between people.

The Development of Familiarity

To the work of Zajonc (1968) the idea traces back that repeated presentation of stimuli, even if unreinforced, causes an increase of positive evaluation of these stimuli. This effect has been replicated in many different domains (e.g., evaluations, mood; see Maio & Haddock, 2010), also with respect to repeated contact with people: the more frequently one encounters initially unfamiliar persons, the more likely one develops a sense of familiarity with them (Moreland & Beach, 1992). Transferring this so-called mere exposure effect (see also Zajonc, 1980) to the contact between social work practitioners and their clients, it can be hypothesized that social workers develop a higher degree of familiarity with clients they meet more frequently than with clients they see less often. Higher familiarity implies that these clients are liked more, that one feels more intensely connected to them, and that one feels more empathy with them (Karremans & Finkenauer, 2023).

The Development of Attraction

As shown in additional research, familiarity fosters perceptions of similarity between actors (Moreland & Beach, 1992), and perceived similarity enhances feelings of attraction. As documented by studies from Byrne (1971), the more similar one considers the own person to the other person, the more likeable one finds this person. Numerous research have validated this so-called similarity-attraction effect for different areas (e.g., attitudes, hobbies, etc.; see Byrne, Ervin & Lamberth, 1970; Lea & Duck, 1982; and Byrne, 1997, for an overview) and also showed that perceived similarity is higher in satisfying relationships than in unsatisfying ones (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Hassebrauck, 1996; Murray et al., 2002).Relating these social psychological findings to the relationship between social workers and their clients, it can be hypothesized that the quality of the relationship with clients varies with the perceived similarity to them: in a qualitatively more positive relationship, one sees stronger correspondences in thinking, feeling and behaving with clients compared to clients with whom a less positive relationship is given.

However, if the attraction to clients increases too much in the course of the intervention process, social workers may enter a borderline area where they risk abandoning the necessary neutral working relationship: this occurs when they develop romantic feelings towards clients.

The Development of Romantic Feelings

According to Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory, the strength of romantic feelings towards a person is influenced by three variables: the degree of psychological (or emotional) closeness to this person (opening oneself fully to the other; intimacy), the intensity of perceived physical attraction to this person (wanting to get physically close; passion) and the willingness to desire a longer-term relationship with this person (also outside the counseling setting; commitment). The theory has been empirically supported in a large number of studies (see Sternberg & Sternberg, 2018, for a summary): the more one feels intimacy and passion to a person and the stronger the willingness to commit is pronounced, the more intense are romantic feelings and love towards this person (see also Hassebrauck & Buhl, 1996).

Applying this approach to social workers' relationships with their clients, it is hypothesized that the stronger social workers perceive the three variables of intimacy, passion, and commitment to a client, the more likely they are to feel romantic feelings toward that person.

SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESES

The outlined hypotheses were empirically tested in a survey of German social workers who have direct personal contact with adult clients in their professional practice. It was expected that: (1) more familiarity (in

the sense of empathy, connectedness, etc.) will be perceived to clients with frequent personal contact compared to clients with less contact; (2) more similarity (in thinking, feeling, acting, etc.) will be perceived to clients to which a particularly good relationship is given compared to clients with a less good relation; and (3) more intense romantic feelings (in the sense of wishing a loving relationship) to a client will be perceived the stronger social workers feel intimacy, passion and commitment to them.

METHOD

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out online. German social work practitioners were asked to participate in a survey on "interpersonal relationships between professional social workers and clients". The link to the survey was posted on relevant internet forums in Germany related to Social Work (e.g. Facebook groups on 'Social Work', 'Network Social Work and Social Services', etc.), and sent to social work institutions in Germany via email with the request to forward the link to their colleagues.

The study followed the ethical research guidelines of the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). Participants were initially informed that the study was purely for scientific purposes, that there was no risk for the respondents, that participation was voluntary and that the questionnaire could be stopped at any time without disadvantages. Subsequently, participants were asked to agree that personal data would be stored pseudo-anonymously and only passed on to persons involved in the research project. Furthermore, it was pointed out that only persons working with adult clients could participate in the study and that data collection is completely anonymous. Finally, an email address was provided for further questions.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

All literal instructions presented in the following were translated from German.

Socio-Demographic Variables

Participants were asked whether they have "a degree in social work" (yes, no) and what's their "highest academic degree" (Diploma, Bachelor, Master, Ph.D.). In addition, they indicated their gender (male, female, diverse), age (in years), professional experience (in years), and "the field of social work in which they work" (open question).

Contact Frequency and Attitudes towards Clients

Participants rated four statements related to "clients with whom they had/have comparatively much contact" (high contact frequency): (1) "I can empathise well with these clients" (feel empathetic), (2) "I often feel a strong

interest in the lifes of these clients" (feel interested), (3) "I feel connected to these clients" (feel connected), and (4) "These clients leave a positive impression on me" (feel impressed). The items were rated on response scales ranging from 1 = not at all correct to 5 = completely correct (the same format was used for all scales of the questionnaire). After this, they rated the same four items in relation to "clients with whom you had/have comparatively little contact" (low contact frequency).

Quality of Relationship and Perceived Similarity to Clients

First, participants were asked to rate four statements regarding "clients with whom a very good interpersonal relationship has developed": (1) "In important areas, these clients often show attitudes that are very similar to mine" (similar attitudes), (2) "These clients often report feelings that I can understand very well and that I know from myself" (similar feelings), (3) "Often these clients think quite similarly to myself" (similar thinking), and (4) "These clients often show behaviours (e.g. minor habits) that I know from myself" (similar behaviours). Then, they rated the same four items in relation to "clients with whom a comparatively less good interpersonal relationship has developed".

Variables Promoting Romantic Feelings of Social Workers

The following instruction was given first: "In practice, it can happen that you have to deal with clients with whom you could basically imagine a personal or loving relationship. Even though this is rarely the case, it can nevertheless happen. Please choose one person from your current or former clientele with whom you have most likely felt or still have such feelings. Please rate the following statements only in relation to this person." Then, three items each were used to capture the following variables: (1) intimacy (e.g., "My willingness to talk about my private life with this person is/was greater than usual"), (2) passion (e.g., "I feel/felt very comfortable with the idea of an intimate physical closeness, e.g. kissing"), (3) commitment (e.g., "I can/could imagine meeting this person in my private life as well") and (4) love (e.g., "The love towards this person is/was very strong").

Strategies to Deal with Romantic Feelings during the Counselling Process

Following the instruction "Now we are talking about experiences you have/had in your professional practice so far with the topics of attraction and being in love between you and your client", participants were asked to answer the following questions: (1) "I would discuss it in supervision and/or with my colleagues, if I fell in love with a client", (2) "I would transfer a client to another colleague or institution, if I fell in love", and (3) "If I

seriously fell in love, I would be willing to give up my job for the relationship". In addition, participants worked on the following items about romantic feelings of their clients: (1) "I feel unwell, when I notice that a client is attracted to me", (2) "I would discuss it with the client if they were attracted to me", and (3) "I would discuss it in supervision and/or with my colleagues, if clients told me that they were attracted to me".

Sample Description

The link to the survey was accessed by 312 persons, but only 287 filled in the complete questionnaire (92%). From these persons, 59 indicated that they did not have a degree in social work (21%). After excluding these persons, the final sample size was n = 228. From these persons, about three quarters (76%) are female (no diverse persons) and age ranged between 22 and 65 years (mean = 37 years). Their academic degree is Diploma (34%), Bachelor (52%), and Master (14%); no Ph.D. On average, they have 11 years of professional experience. Their fields of occupation in social work were categorized based on a classification by Kricheldorff, Becker & Schwab (2012): almost half of participants come from the areas of Child, Youth and Family Services (25%, CYFS) and Addiction and Mental Illness Services (21%, AMIS), while the remaining persons were distributed with 10% or less to nine further categories (e.g. healthcare, social work with disabled people, migrants or homeless people, social work in education etc.).

RESULTS

Frequency of Contact and Attitudes towards Clients

Figure 1 shows the frequencies of participants' ratings of the four attitude variables (feel empathetic, interested, connected and impressed) for the two levels of frequency of contact. As can be seen there, for all four attitudes there is more consent to the items for the condition with high contact frequency than for the condition with low contact frequency.
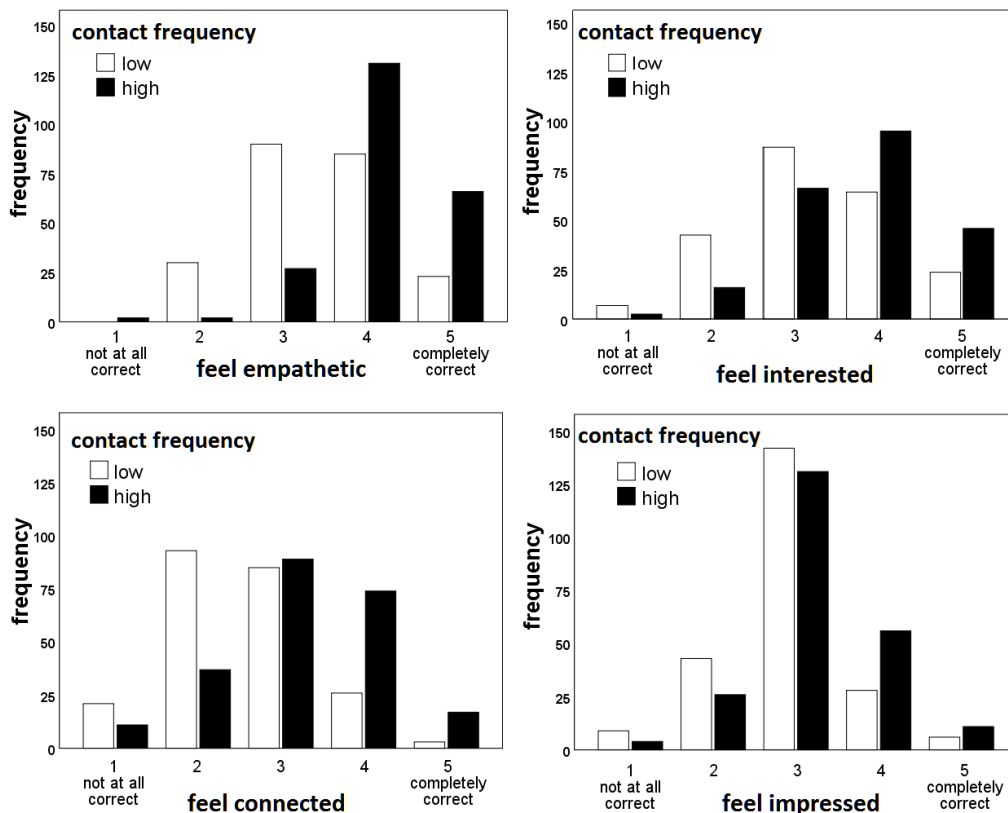

Figure 1. Level of contact frequency and social workers' attitudes towards clients

Note. n = 228 German social workers. Level of contact frequency: low = little contact to a client; high = much contact to a client. Response scales range from 1 = not at all correct to 5 = completely correct.

Wilcoxon tests revealed the following means and Z values: feel empathetic (low contact frequency: 3.44 vs. high contact frequency: 4.13; Z = -9.27), which is the most pronounced effect, followed by feel connected (2.55 vs. 3.21; Z = -8.89), feel interested (3.25 vs. 3.73; Z = -7.85), and feel impressed (2.91 vs. 3.19; Z = -4.97). All Z values are significant at the p < .001 level.

Quality of Relationship and Perceived Similarity to Clients

In Figure 2, the frequencies of participants' similarity ratings (similar attitudes, feelings, thoughts, and behaviours) for the two levels of quality of relationship (less good vs. very good) are shown. It can be seen

there, that agreements to all four variables are higher for the condition of a very good relationship to clients than for the case of a less good relationship. In Wilcoxon tests the following means and Z values resulted: similar feelings (less good relation: 2.50 vs. very good relation:

3.18; Z = -8.62), which is the strongest effect, followed by similar attitudes (2.23 vs. 2.89; Z = -7.94), similar thinking (2.06 vs. 2.50; Z = -6.54) and similar behaviours (2.02 vs. 2.38; Z = -6.17). Again, all Z values are significant at the p < .001 level.
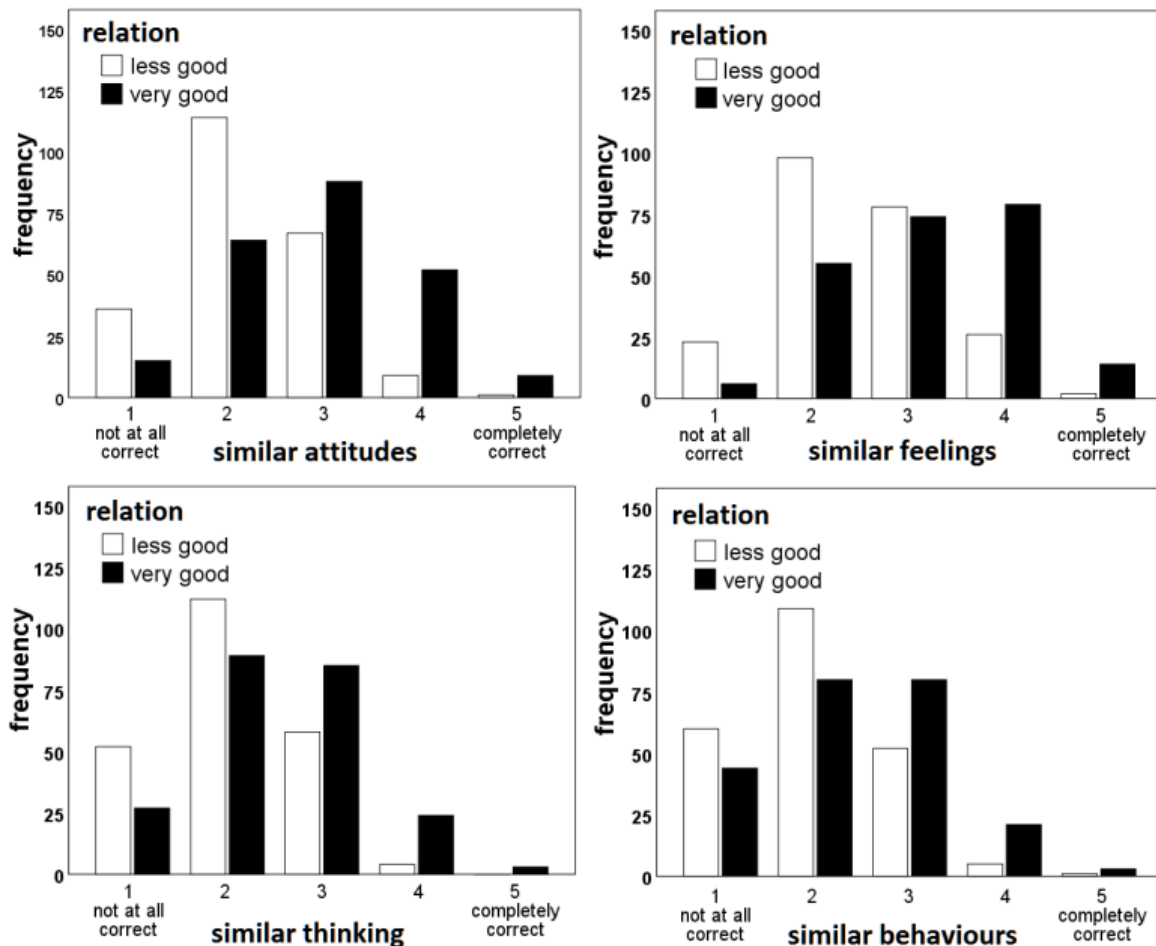

Figure 2. Quality of relationship and social workers' perceived similarity to clients

Note. n = 228 German social workers. Quality of relation: less good = a problematic relationship to a client; very good = an ideal relationship to a client. Response scales range from 1 = not at all correct to 5 = completely correct.

Correlates of Social Workers' Romantic Feelings

Since scores of Cronbach's Alpha in reliability analyses indicate an acceptable to good level of internal consistency for the three variables of intimacy (α = .89), passion (α = .83), commitment (α = .82) and romantic feelings (α = .78), scales were built for each construct by calculating the mean of the single items (Cronbach, 1951). The total correlations between these four scales are shown in Table 1. For the total sample (228 participants), Pearson coefficients are .56 for intimacy,

.63 for passion and .65 for commitment with romantic feelings towards clients. In addition, the coefficients do not vary remarkably with participants' gender, but are slightly lower for the two sub-groups of participants from Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS, 57 persons) and Addiction and Mental Illness Services (AMIS, 48 persons). Nevertheless, all correlations displayed in Table 1 are significant at the p < .005 level and indicate strong relations between variables (see Cohen, 1988).

Table 1. Correlation analysis: Total coefficients between intimacy, passion, commitment and romantic feelings

Sub-samples	women	men	CYFS	AMIS	total
intimacy	.54	.61	.41	.48	.56
passion	.64	.62	.66	.40	.63
commitment	.70	.58	.58	.48	.65

Note. Total sample: n = 228 German social work practitioners; women: n = 171; men: n = 55; CYFS: n = 57 practitioners from Child, Youth and Family Services; AMIS: n = 48 practitioners from Addiction and Mental Illness Services. All Pearson coefficients are significant at the p < .005 level.

Furthermore, romantic feelings were regressed on the three variables of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory, which revealed partial correlations (beta coefficients) of $\beta = .21$ for intimacy, $\beta = .35$ for passion, and $\beta = .31$ for commitment (all coefficients are significant at the $p < .001$ level). The multiple correlation of this model is $R = .73$, indicating a variance explanation (R^2) of about 54% of the criterion. These results underline, that all three variables of Sternberg's approach show largely independent connections to romantic feelings.

Strategies to Deal with Romantic Feelings during the Intervention Process

The left side of Figure 3 shows the assessments of the total sample of practitioners on how they would react if they have romantic feelings towards a client. The most used strategy is "to transfer a client to another colleague or institution" (median Md = 3, mean M = 3.1), followed by discussing it "in supervision and/or with my colleagues" (Md = 4, M = 3.5), and "to be willing to give up my job" with quite low scores (Md = 1, M = 2.1).

On its right side, Figure 3 also portrays social workers' reactions to situations in which clients show romantic feelings towards them. The most preferred strategy is "to discuss it in supervision and/or with my colleagues" (Md = 5, M = 4.5), but there are also high scores for "feel unwell" (Md = 4, M = 3.8) and "discussing it with the client" (Md = 4, M = 3.5).
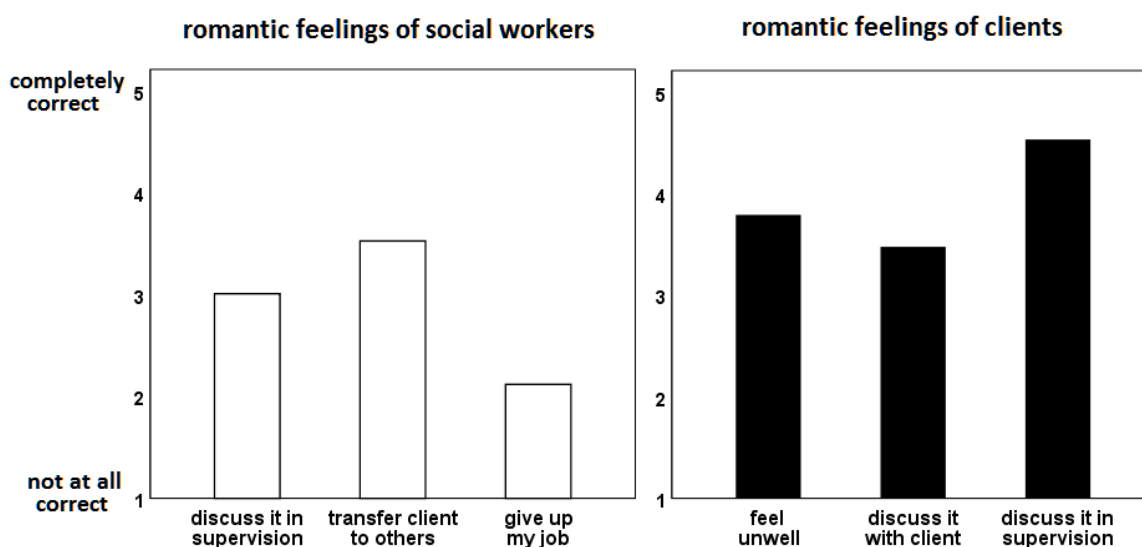

Figure 3. Means of social workers' strategies to deal with romantic feelings

Note. n = 228 German social workers. Response scales range from 1 = not at all correct to 5 = completely correct.

DISCUSSION

Evaluation of the Hypotheses

The reported results are in good agreement with the three formulated hypotheses. As expected, (1) the level of familiarity toward clients increases with the frequency of contact with them, (2) the level of perceived similarity to clients rises with the quality of the relationship with them, and (3) the tendency for social workers to feel romantic toward clients is influenced by the desire for emotional and physical closeness and the willingness to form a long-term attachment. The findings therefore represent a support for a successful application of the addressed social psychological theories - the mere exposure effect, the similarity-attraction effect, and the triangular theory - to social workers' relationships to their clients in their practical work.

Validation of the Findings

In addition, the results of the present study successfully replicate findings of a former investigation, which used a completely identical methodological approach (i.e., online administration of the same questionnaire)with a different sample of social work practitioners in Germany (n = 262; Winkler, 2017).

A comparison of the findings of both surveys yields the following picture: (1) frequency of contact: after combining the four familiarity items to a single scale, for the conditions of low vs. high contact frequency effect sizes of d = -0.89 (current study) and d = -0.83 (previous study) emerged; (2) quality of relationship: after forming a scale with the four similarity items, for the conditions of less vs. very good relation the effect sizes were d = -0.75 (current study) and d = -0.91 (previous study); and (3) the regression of romantic feelings on the three predictors intimacy, passion and commitment, which yielded a multiple correlation of R = .73 in the current study, showed a value of R = .86 in the previous investigation.

The particularly broad agreement between the findings of the two independent surveys underlines the high validity of the current results. Furthermore, all

investigated independent factors show remarkably strong effects on dependent measures: according to Cohen (1988), the effect sizes for frequency of contact and quality of relation of d ~ .8 can be considered as *large*, and the goodness-of-fit for romantic feelings with a variance resolution of $R^2 > 50\%$ as *high*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

For social work - and other professions involved in face-to-face interventions with people - the findings represent a 'double-edged sword', as they can be related to both positive and potentially detrimental relationship development between counselor and client. In psychosocial interventions, the focus is not on creating the best possible personal relationship between counselor and client, but on establishing a fruitful working relationship that is conducive to achieving the desired change goals. This working relationship is characterized by an imbalance on several dimensions, e.g. in terms of power, dependency, exchange and reciprocity (a 'vertical relationship' according to Finkenauer et al., 2004; Klug et al., 2020). In the following, the findings on frequency of contact, similarities and attraction as well as romantic feelings are related to the practice of social work and some challenges for relationship work are discussed.

The Contact Trap

Relationships always begin with contact, which also applies to social work, and relationships grow with the frequency of contact. Frequent contact provides more opportunities to gather knowledge and information about the other person, which is essential for the entire counseling process (diagnosis, intervention, evaluation). The frequency of contact between counselor and client can therefore make an important contribution to the success of the intervention process. However, as shown in the present study, contact also promotes attitudes towards clients that are characterized by increased empathy, more interest and connectedness. However, if highly developed, this can jeopardize the neutrality of the working relationship if, for example, 'long-term clients' are perceived more positively and treated differently from 'short-term clients', as this contradicts Biestek's (1957) call for non-judgmental attitudes in social work, which should apply to all clients.

The Similarity Trap

More contact also provides more opportunities to discover similarities between the counselor and the client (Athanasiou & Yoshioka, 1973; Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950). The more similar people perceive themselves to be, the more contact with them becomes informative and meaningful (Wood, Taylor & Lichtman, 1985). This seems certainly useful for the development of everyday relationships in order to build mutual sympathy and attraction. But for the

psychosocial working relationship, on the other hand, the formation of sympathy (or antipathy) is rather disturbing and undesirable, because in psychosocial practice, sympathy and antipathy towards the client should not really play a role (Schäfter, 2010) - on the contrary, it is rather a sign of professionalism if unsympathetic clients are treated with the same commitment (and success) as sympathetic ones. In this respect, it is somewhat disconcerting when - as shown in the present study - 'good' relationships with clients are related to the strength of similarities to oneself, because according to Biestek's (1957) second demand on social work, relationships with clients should be characterized by controlled emotional involvement.

The Love Trap

Romantic relationships in context with professional counseling are not permitted under the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) as well as the German Professional Association for Social Work (DBSH, 2009). Nevertheless, love can also occur in such situations, because even consultants are only human. As demonstrated in the present study, the perception of love is particularly influenced by psychological closeness and physical attraction, which causes the desire for a lasting connection. In order to prevent such an undesirable development (because it is unprofessional and illegal), it seems advisable for counselors to hold back with self-disclosures about themselves, even if self-disclosures are a sensible and necessary behavior on the part of the client (Jourard, 1971; Kelly & McKillop, 1996; for social psychological exchange theories, see e.g. Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Counselors should only appear to the client in their professional role and not enter into dual or multiple relationships as acquaintances, friends or partners (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994; Reamer, 2003; but see Pugh, 2007, and Galbreath, 2005, for rural social work).To avoid romantic feelings on the part of clients, it also seems advisable to avoid overly revealing clothing and gifts (Gutheil & Gabbard, 1993) and to limit physical contact to the bare minimum (e.g. shaking hands), at least as far as contact with adult clients is concerned. Physical closeness should be avoided in psychosocial relationships, as repeated touching of clients can be misunderstood, especially when it comes from male counselors.

As far as the professional handling of romantic feelings in social work is concerned, the reported findings from the open-ended surveys show that practitioners obviously handle them very professionally overall, which seems pleasing: the most frequent response in the case of romantic feelings of the social worker was "transfer client to others" and for romantic feelings of clients "discuss it in supervision".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Human relationships are quite complex and influenced by a variety of factors. The working relationship that is sought in the context of psychosocial interventions represents a special feature that should not or must not be confused with a personal everyday relationship. The relationship skills of social workers therefore also include the ability to regulate closeness and distance in a skillful and targeted manner (Dörr & Müller, 2012; Best, 2020), as neither aspect should be too pronounced, but neither should be absent.

Although there are also authors who regard the establishment of a 'good' relationship with clients as a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful counseling (e.g. Bullmann, 2006), it is possible that the quality of the relationship influences the way in which the client deals with the problem (e.g. through an increased commitment to the intervention measures), which in turn can have a positive effect on the outcome.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION AND INFORMED CONSENT

Not applicable.

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