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Angelica Terepka

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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EFFECTS OF ASSESSING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN INITIAL SESSIONS
ON ASPECTS OF THE THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

Angelica Terepka

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Psychology

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Angelica Terepka

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Psychology

Derek R. Hatfield, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology, Chair

Beverly Goodwin, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology

Lisa C. Newell, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology

ACCEPTED

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: Effects of Assessing Religious Beliefs in Initial Sessions on Aspects of the Therapeutic Alliance

Author: Angelica Terepka

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Derek R. Hatfield

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Beverly Goodwin
Dr. Lisa C. Newell

Religion has been an area of diversity often ignored by clinical and research professionals. More recent qualitative research investigating the perspectives of religious clients suggests that acknowledging religious beliefs in the therapeutic context may contribute to the relationship between therapist and client. The aim of the present study was to examine participant perceptions and expectations about religious discussion in a secular setting. A total of 120 participants were interviewed using one of two interview protocols (i.e., interview with/without religious inquiry). Participants were asked to rate the interviewer on general qualities (i.e., warmth, competence, genuineness) and empathetic understanding, characteristics that have been shown to correlate with an improved therapeutic alliance. Expectations of religious discussion in a secular setting prior participation and experiences of religious discussion while participating in the study were also measured. Data was analyzed using a series of 3 x 2 between-groups ANOVA's, 3 x 2 MANOVA's, independent t-tests, and meditational regression analyses. Results indicate that the majority of individuals (62.6%) believe that religiosity is an important domain of mental health that should be addressed by mental health professionals, but approximately half of the sample (48.9%) did not expect therapists at secular settings to assess religiosity of clients. Further, expectations and desire to engage in religious discussion is dependent on the religiosity level of the individual.

Results of the current study also found that individuals asked about their religiosity in an interview analogous to an initial therapy session experienced the interviewer as more empathetic, warm, understanding, experienced, trustworthy, and friendly. Further, participants reported being more willing to disclose future personal information to the interviewer when queried about their religiosity during the interview. Results indicated that individuals asked about their religiosity during the interview were significantly more comfortable with religious discussion than those not asked about their religiosity. Comfort with religious discussion was found to be a significant mediator in the relationship between assessment of religiosity and a) higher ratings of the interviewer and b) a greater willingness to disclose in future therapy with the interviewer.