

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Attitude of Austrian students toward psychotherapy

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**Objectives:** Mental health issues are of ever growing importance in modern society. While there are numerous studies on the attitude of the general public toward psychiatry in general, little research has been done concerning the specific field of psychotherapy.

**Methods:** 231 Austrian students out of four different university branches of study (medicine, psychology, pedagogy, economy) were investigated concerning their direct and indirect (connotations and associations) attitudes toward psychotherapy.

**Results:** Attitudes vary significantly between the groups with medical and economy students viewing psychotherapy distinctly less favourably than psychology and pedagogy students. Associations to psychotherapy are still heavily influenced by old stereotypes.

**Conclusions:** The importance of attitudes and beliefs in the clinical process is discussed. We also call for a more open discussion of issues concerning mental health and psychotherapy in public to reduce still prevalent stereotypes. There is also need for further implementation of psychotherapy-related content in the medical curricula.

**Key Words:** *attitude, students, psychotherapy, associations, stereotyping.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Considering the importance of the anti-stigma movement in the field of mental diseases<sup>1</sup> and the numerous studies that have been conducted on the attitude of the general public regarding mental illnesses and psychiatric interventions<sup>2</sup>, it is surprising how little research has been undertaken on the public's attitude toward psychotherapy.

The question of mental health is of ever-growing importance in modern society for a number of reasons. Aside from the obvious impact on the individual's quality of life we would like to point out the economic aspects concerning mental diseases. As longitudinal epidemiological research indicates the prevalence of psychosocially influenced disorders lies between 20-26% in the general population.<sup>3</sup> And lifetime prevalence of mental disorders is reported to about 50 % of the general population,

as studies from the US have shown.<sup>4</sup> It is also known that, without proper treatment, people suffering from psychogenic diseases tend to over-utilize medical facilities and thus are responsible for a substantial part of the national health care budget. These direct treatment costs have to be combined with indirect morbidity costs resulting from problems concerning mental illness in the workplace (absenteeism, reduction of productivity, etc.).<sup>5</sup> There is abundant evidence that psychotherapy can have a beneficial impact on both, the direct and indirect costs of mental illnesses.<sup>6</sup> For example, Smit et al<sup>7</sup> have shown that even minimal psychotherapeutic contact of people with sub-threshold depression can reduce the risk of developing a full-blown depression and so significantly reduce overall costs.

The utilization of psychotherapeutic intervention is still deficient for a number of reasons. Hessel et al<sup>8</sup> point out, that the information about the existence of the psychosocial professions is poor and the acceptance of their competence relatively low. These results are in accordance with evidence brought forth by Lauber et al<sup>9</sup> who stated that the mental health literacy of the public is generally low and needs to be raised so that health systems will be able to work more efficiently.

In general, a sceptic attitude toward psychotherapy is found in literature reflecting the situation in clinical practice. There are widely held stereotypes prevalent in society toward psychotherapy and therapists.<sup>10</sup> Some are connected to the general stigmatization of mental disorders; some are specific for psychotherapy: for example, the swiftly made connection of psychotherapy with the name of Sigmund Freud and a tendency to reduce the different facets of life to sexuality. Studies have shown<sup>2</sup> that attitudes and belief systems prevalent in society have a major impact on help-seeking behaviour, both through transmission to the person suffering from mental distress via his/her social network and through the person's own attitudes formed in the process of socialization. Therefore it is evident, that the perceived image of psychotherapy plays a significant role in the process of taking up therapy or following the suggested transferral to a therapist by a medical doctor. But the attitude of a possible patient is not only important in the beginning stages of taking up treatment, but also a factor influencing the course of therapy and its outcome. Schneider et al<sup>11</sup> state, that openness to psychotherapy at the pre-treatment interview predict more positive treatment outcomes.

Considering all of the above mentioned, it is of great importance to know about the attitude of the general public regarding the field of psychotherapy. The aim of

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