

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Psychoanalytical theory of affects and its applicability on the Affect Regulation and Affect Experience Q-Sort Test (AREQ)

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ABSTRACT

■ **Background** Disturbances in affect-experience or its regulation are common in mental and physical illnesses and are included among diagnostic criteria for many mental and psycho-somatic diseases. The level of emotional functioning influences health behavior and coping with illnesses.

■ **Aim of the study** The psychoanalytical theory of affects offers basic concepts for forming a comprehensive assessment of mental functioning. The aim of this study was to examine the applicability of the psychoanalytic theory on a test instrument, the *Affect Regulation and Experience Q-Sort Test* (AREQ) by the use of the theory's essential parts in the form of factors (Factors-Theory: FT). The factors *F-Theory* were labelled *mature defence, immature defence, development - oral stage, development - anal stage, development - genital stage, drive discharge, signal affect, fear of dependence, cathexis-distraction*. A further goal of this study was to examine the AREQ test results performed on an Austrian population sample and finally to assess whether the original factor structure published by Westen and Shedler could be reproduced in this clinical sample.

■ **Methods** The standard factor analysis revealed an interpretable nine-factor solution, within a sample of psychiatric in- and outpatients. The resulting factors (Factors-Sample) were labelled as follows: *missing alpha-function, mature psychological functioning, destroyed affect-percep-*

tion, splitting, idealisation, devaluation, denial, histrionic acting out, ambivalent-avoidant, reaction-formation, object-relation, rationalization.

■ **Results** The empirically defined factors used in the Austrian sample of our study showed correspondences and an overlapping with the factors derived from the psychoanalytic theory and the original factors of Westen and colleagues.

■ **Conclusion** This study confirms the importance of investigating the applicability of psychometric instruments in various clinical samples. The AREQ test can be used in the diagnostics and during the assessment of treatment. Special features of the sample (diagnostic interviews and therapy process data) as well as the raters' theoretical background are probably able to influence the resulting factor structure. The outcome of this study might be helpful for building up core concepts for the construction of new instruments.

■ **Keywords:** affect, psychoanalysis, Psychoanalytic Theory, Psychoanalytic Interpretation, Affect Regulation and Experience Q-Sort Test (AREQ).

(see the appendix for the rest of keywords).

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with affects influences physical and mental health and is also part of diagnostic categories. Health behaviour and the handling of illness are conditional upon emotional functioning. Therefore, emotions have prognostic importance for dealing and coping with illnesses. The relevance of handling emotions responsibly will be underlined. Furthermore, examples for several problem areas, interesting for medical fields, will be demonstrated: communication, affects as a part of diagnostic categories and their role as indicators of illness. The medical interview aims at forging a working alliance, collecting information and securing the patient's

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