

DOES ATTACHMENT PREDICT PSYCHOTHERAPISTS' MENTALIZATION WITH REAL PATIENTS?

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INTRODUCTION

- Elaboration of countertransference experience (ECE): implicit and explicit psychological work to which therapists submit experiences with patients (Barreto & Matos, 2016)
- Mentalizing process of a particular kind (therapists' self-oriented mentalizing) through which therapists' experiences acquire and increase in mental quality (ibid.)
- Research addressing psychotherapists' mentalization is extremely scarce, and very few studies within this field involved real patients as participants
- Preliminary findings suggest that therapist mentalization processes benefit therapeutic work (Cologon et al., 2017; Rizq & Target, 2010; Reading, 2013)
- Despite established association between the constructs, no studies to our knowledge have yet investigated the impact of attachment on therapist mentalizing processes
- Evidence that patients' attachment dimensions affect therapeutic process (e.g., Diener & Monroe, 2012)
- Mixed results concerning the impact of therapist attachment and therapist-patient attachment match on therapy (e.g., Degnan et al., 2016)
- Therapist attachment dimensions may impact psychotherapy in interaction with patients variables (Bucci et al., 2015; Schauenburg et al., 2010)
- Relational similarity may benefit initial alliance, but dissimilarity may disconfirm transference expectations and facilitate transforming experiences (Bernier & Dozier, 2002; Mallinckrodt et al., 2009)

OBJECTIVES

- Present a model for assessing ECE (Figures 1 and 2) and preliminary findings from an ongoing longitudinal study
- Compare therapist and patient contributions to therapist ECE processes in psychotherapy
- Examine therapist, patient, and dyadic attachment predictors of ECE and ECE change in early psychotherapy

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

- 16 therapists working with 24 adult patients in natural settings of individual psychotherapy
- Patients: 15 women and 5 men, ages from 19 to 58 years-old (M = 29.4, SD = 12.3) (4 patients missed initial assessment)
- Therapists: 11 women and 5 men, ages from 28 to 55 years-old (M = 40.4, SD = 7.7), 4 to 23 years of experience (M = 13.7, SD = 5.7); predominant theoretical orientation: 5 psychoanalytic/dynamic, 2 humanistic/experiential, 4 cognitive-behavioral, 1 systemic, 2 eclectic/integrative, 1 assimilated psychoanalytic/dynamic and systemic, 1 assimilated cognitive-behavioral and eclectic/integrative

INSTRUMENTS

- *Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures* (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011; Portuguese version by Moreira et al., 2014): Self-report designed to assess attachment dimensions in different relationships (9 items), scoring for attachment-related Avoidance and Anxiety. In this study, 3 targets were included (mother, father, and romantic partner or best friend), originating global Avoidance and Anxiety scores (internal consistency and descriptive statistics in Table 1). Discrepancy coefficients in Avoidance and Anxiety were calculated as the absolute difference between T and C scores on each of these dimensions, higher values meaning increased dissimilarity
- *Elaboration of Countertransference Experience Scales* (ECES; Barreto & Matos, 2016): Rating system composed of 6 diversely mentalized countertransference (CT) positions (Figure 1) and 7 underlying dimensions of mental elaboration (Figure 2). Applied to therapists' post-session comments (contextual "state" assessment) in which one predominant CT position is identified and each dimension is rated (0 to 4) in separate and articulated in a total ECE score (0 to 28) (interrater reliability and descriptive statistics in Table 1)

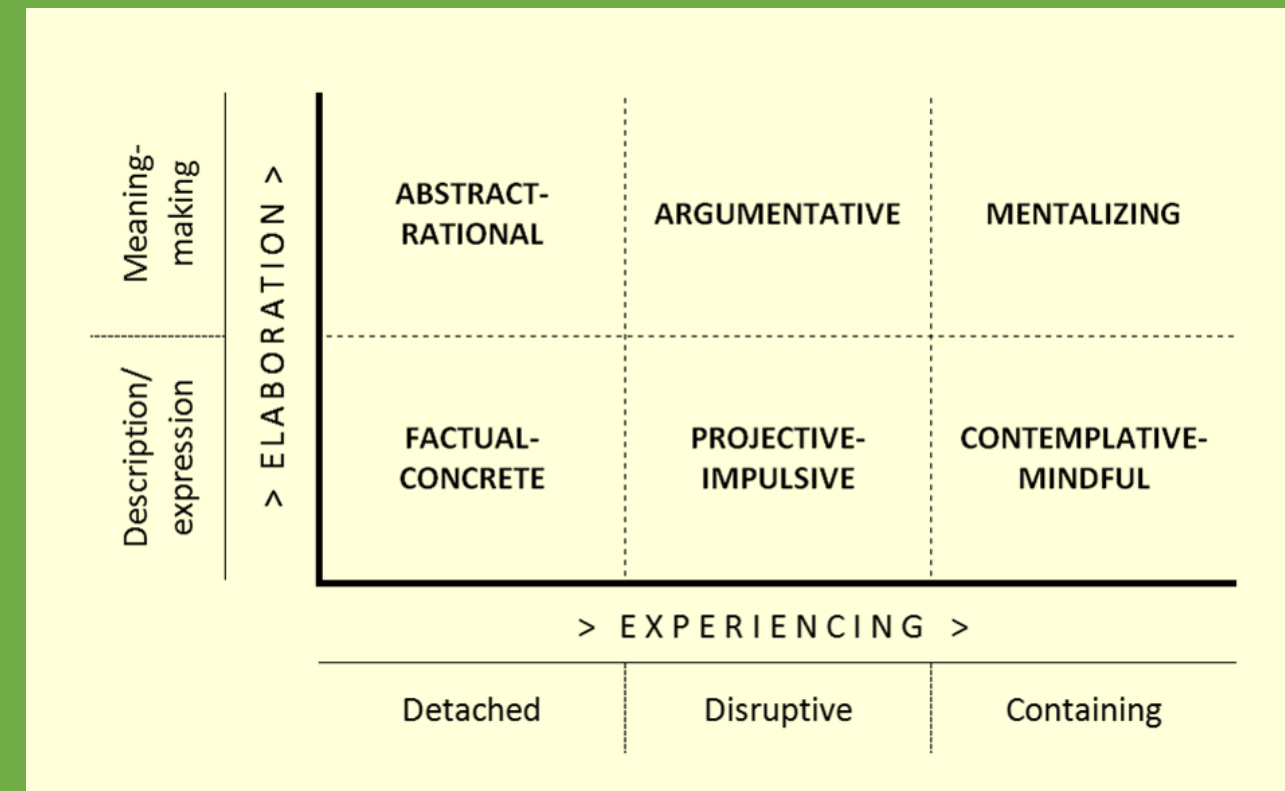
PROCEDURE

- Therapists invited to participate following formal contacts with psychotherapy societies and professional organizations and peer nomination technique
- Patients received the invitation and materials through their therapists
- All data collected anonymously and on-line (*LimeSurvey 1.87**) after informed consent and separately for each individual participant
- Socio-demographic data and attachment assessed prior to 2nd session
- Therapists were asked to write post-session comments and impressions through a demand question (Fonagy et al., 1998) after sessions 2, 5, 8, and 10
- 75 comments obtained: 20 were rated by two independent judges and subsequently compared, discussed and harmonized; remaining 55 independently rated by same judges and used to calculate interrater reliability (final ratings of the 7 dimensions are the judges' averaged scores)
- Study approved by the authors' institutional Ethics Committee

DATA ANALYSIS

- Multilevel analyses with ratings of 68 comments at level 1 were performed with competing level 2 clustering criteria (15 therapists vs. 19 patients/dyads) for comparison. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated for each ECE dimension from the unconditional means models (Singer & Willett, 2003) (Table 2)
- Time (centered on session 2) and attachment dimensions (centered on their respective means) were tested as level 1 and level 2 predictors through multilevel modeling with 52 outcome measures at level 1 and 14 independent dyads at level 2 (Table 3)
- Data analysis was completed with the visual inspection of each dimensions' change in mean plots across the 4 time-points for the 15 dyads with all waves completed (Figure 3)
- All analyses run with *IBM SPSS Statistics 24*

Figure 1



DIMENSION	DESCRIPTION
EXPERIENCING*	Increasing subjectivation, ownership, appropriation, or containment of immediate experience
REFLECTIVE ELABORATION*	Effort to explain, organize, or make sense (facts, ideas, experiences)
EPISTEMIC POSITION	Experienced relation between therapist's psychic reality and external reality (therapeutic process, patient)
EXPERIENTIAL GROUNDEDNESS	Extent to which therapist's observations process/integrate and are anchored in concrete aspects of experience
EMOTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION	Complexity and discriminative capacity with which emotional themes are treated
TEMPORAL FOCUS	Articulation of past and immediate perspectives; differentiation and integration between past, protagonist and present narrator perspectives
INTERNAL FOCUS	Extent to which internal experience is attended to and explored

Figure 2

	Reliability Cronbach's α	Scale	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skew	Kurt	n	
Th Avoidance	.93	1-7	2.77	1.09	1.50	5.17	0.70	-0.09	14	
Th Anxiety	.90	1-7	1.60	0.93	1.00	4.22	2.01	4.26		
Pt Avoidance	.78	1-7	3.22	0.87	2.11	5.00	0.62	-0.51		
Pt Anxiety	.87	1-7	2.69	1.38	1.00	6.00	0.84	1.08		
Cohen's k (n=55)										
Experiencing	.88	0-4	1.88	1.30	0.00	4.00	-0.18	-1.46	75	
Reflective Elabor	.74	0-4	2.02	0.92	0.00	4.00	0.27	-0.35		
Epistemic Position	.84	0-4	1.92	1.59	0.00	4.00	0.08	-1.57		
Experiential Ground	.76	0-4	2.55	1.27	0.00	4.00	-0.31	-1.13		
Emotional Differen	.82	0-4	2.75	1.13	0.00	4.00	-1.00	0.45		
Temporal Focus	.54	0-4	1.92	1.12	0.00	4.00	0.42	-0.78		
Internal Focus	.96	0-4	2.11	1.46	0.00	4.00	-0.27	-1.37		
Total EEC	.94	0-28	15.14	7.14	2.00	26.50	-0.08	-1.31		
Cohen's k (n=55)										
CT Pos	.41	FCAR-PA-CM-M	AR							75

Table 1. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

	Total ECE	Model	Intercept	B	Pseudo-R ²	%
Level 1 var (σ^2_w)	Ther (T)	Unconditional means model	15.19			
	Pt (P)	Unc growth mod ("time" covariate)	16.33	-0.29		
Level 2 var (σ^2_b)	Ther (T)	Th Avoidance	16.31	3.21*	.254	25.4
	Pt (P)	Th Anxiety	16.33	1.38		
ICC	Ther (T)	Pt Avoidance	16.32	2.65		
	Pt (P)	Pt Anxiety	16.33	-3.04*	.414	41.4
%	Ther (T)	Avoidance Discrepancy	21.14	-5.37*	.508	50.8
	Pt (P)	Anxiety Discrepancy	20.49	-3.31**		
%	Ther (T)	Unconditional means model	1.90			
	Pt (P)	Unc growth mod ("time" covariate)	2.19	-0.07		
%	Ther (T)	Th Avoidance	2.18	0.73**	.509	50.9
	Pt (P)	Th Anxiety	2.19	0.45		
%	Ther (T)	Pt Avoidance	2.19	2.19		
	Pt (P)	Pt Anxiety	2.19	-0.55**	.460	46.0
%	Ther (T)	Avoidance Discrepancy	2.98	-0.89		
	Pt (P)	Anxiety Discrepancy	3.01	-0.66**	.684	68.4
%	Ther (T)	Unconditional means model	2.00			
	Pt (P)	Unc growth mod ("time" covariate)	2.38	-0.09		
%	Ther (T)	Th Avoidance	2.29	0.68*	.356	35.6
	Pt (P)	Th Anxiety	2.40	0.35		
%	Ther (T)	Pt Avoidance	2.40	0.23		
	Pt (P)	Pt Anxiety	2.40	-0.55*	.449	44.9
%	Ther (T)	Avoidance Discrepancy	3.52	-1.25*	.331	33.1
	Pt (P)	Anxiety Discrepancy	3.25	-0.68**	.653	65.3
%	Ther (T)	Unconditional means model	2.51			
	Pt (P)	Unc growth mod ("time" covariate)	2.63	-0.03		
%	Ther (T)	Th Avoidance	2.63	0.53*	.257	25.7
	Pt (P)	Th Anxiety	2.63	0.22		
%	Ther (T)	Pt Avoidance	2.63	0.63*	.244	24.4
	Pt (P)	Pt Anxiety	2.64	-0.43*	.284	28.4
%	Ther (T)	Avoidance Discrepancy	2.99	-0.40		
	Pt (P)	Anxiety Discrepancy	3.21	-0.46*	.326	32.6
%	Ther (T)	Unconditional means model	1.86			
	Pt (P)	Unc growth mod ("time" covariate)	1.83	0.01		
%	Ther (T)	Th Avoidance	1.83	0.32		
	Pt (P)	Th Anxiety	1.83	0.05		
%	Ther (T)	Pt Avoidance	1.83	0.29		
	Pt (P)	Pt Anxiety	1.83	-0.47**	.505	5.5
%	Ther (T)	Avoidance Discrepancy	2.64	-0.91*	.310	31.0
	Pt (P)	Anxiety Discrepancy	2.39	-0.45*	.447	44.7
%	Ther (T)	Unconditional means model	2.15			
	Pt (P)	Unc growth mod ("time" covariate)	2.44	-0.07		
%	Ther (T)	Th Avoidance	2.44	0.72*	.436	43.6
	Pt (P)	Th Anxiety	2.44	0.44		
%	Ther (T)	Pt Avoidance	2.44	0.40		
	Pt (P)	Pt Anxiety	2.44	-0.65**	.630	63.0
%	Ther (T)	Avoidance Discrepancy	3.36	-1.02*	.214	21.4
	Pt (P)	Anxiety Discrepancy	3.39	-0.76**	.896	89.6

Table 3. Multilevel Models for Change Within and Variation Across Dyads in ECE Dimensions (n=14)

Table 2. Unconditional Means Models for Therapist (N=15) and Patient (N=19) Level 2 Clustering (75 Level 1 Observations)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- Interrater reliability: mostly good to excellent for ECE dimensions; moderate for CT position
- Different ECE dimensions can be more "therapist-dependent" or "patient-dependent" – countertransference (CT) as *joint creation* (Gabbard, 2001) and mentalization within therapeutic dyads as bidirectional process of mutual influence (Diamond et al., 2003)
- **No systematic linear change over time found** for ECE dimensions. Visual inspection suggests curvilinear (quadratic?) function. Alternative explanations: "trait" dimensions (high ICCs)?
- **Therapist attachment avoidance, patient attachment anxiety, and anxiety discrepancy were the most impacting predictors** across ECE dimensions:
 - **Therapist avoidance positively impacted experiencing, epistemic position, and internal focus** – avoidance within categorically secure therapists? Necessary distance for reflective stance, observing ego, inward attention...? ECE as a deactivating strategy? Coping with CT difficulties coming from closeness in therapeutic relationship?
 - **Patient anxiety hinders most ECE dimensions** – higher relational pressure and need for reassurance pulls therapist into less mentalized functioning/temporarily collapses mental space?
 - **Attachment anxiety discrepancy was the most important negative predictor** of most ECE dimensions – patient anxiety particularly distressing for less anxious therapists?
 - **Both discrepancy variables tended to have negative impact** on EEC – therapists mentalize better on their "proximal relational zone"? Too soon for non-complementarity to become productive (see Goodman, 2010)?
- **Reflective elaboration and emotional differentiation apparently unaffected by attachment** – insufficient statistical power? Different psychological processes? E.g., more rational, objectivistic, and associated with formal quality of representations, and less concerned with the actual dynamic role (see Bouchard et al., 2008)
- Most ECE dimensions appear to **decrease until session 8 and start a U-shaped inflection after** that point – transition after initial complementary/engaging stage (e.g., Goodman, 2010; Mallinckrodt et al., 2009)?

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Larger sample (more statistical power, less effect size inflation, three-level modeling, interaction effects)
- Improve training and interrater reliability for ECES (in particular, ratings for predominant CT position)
- Examine factor structure of ECE scales (apparent 2-factor latent structure)
- Investigate non-linear growth models
- Investigate ECE associations with other predictors, process variables, and therapeutic outcomes

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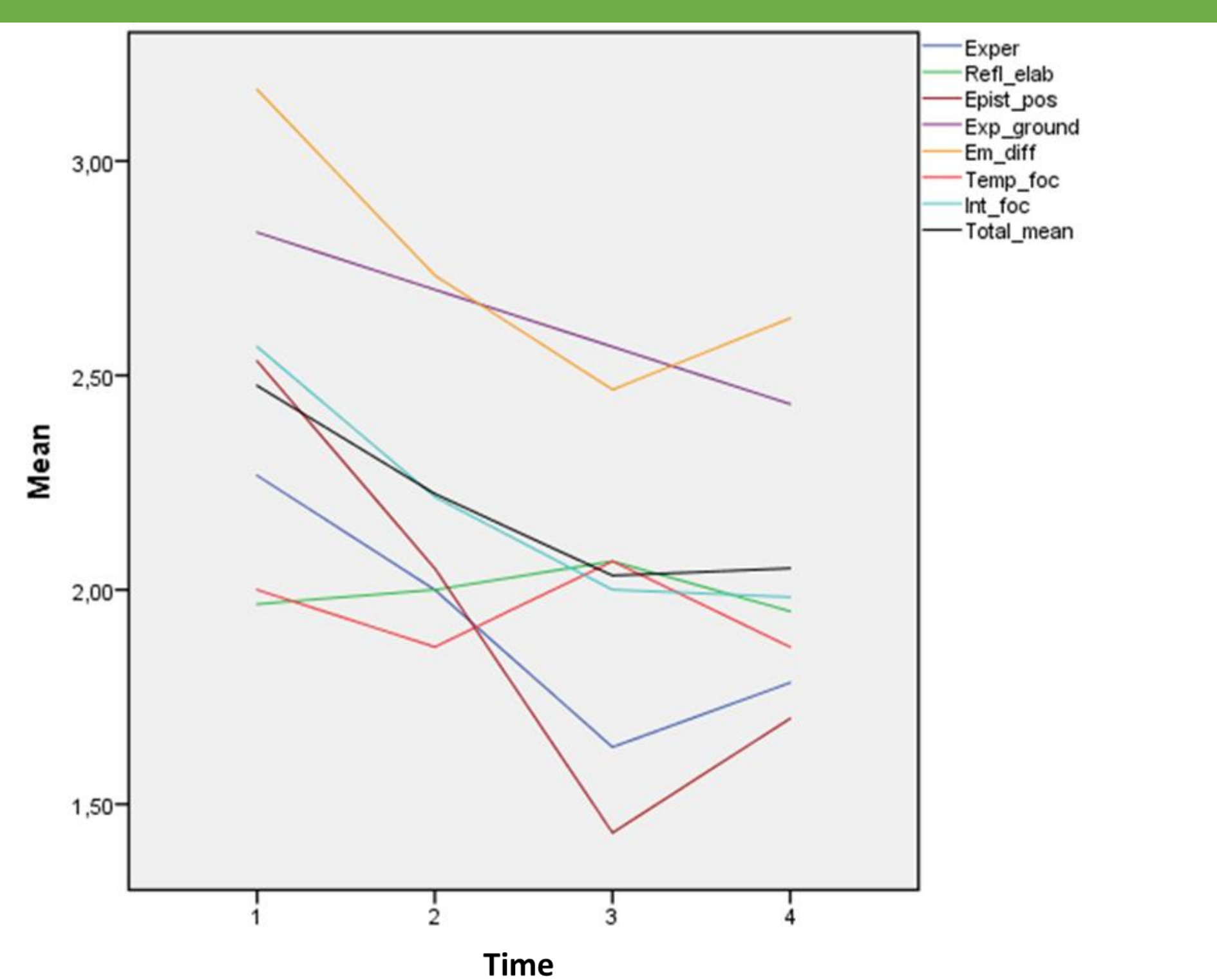


Figure 3