How to study sexual boundary crossings in psychotherapy

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HOW TO STUDY SEXUAL BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS BY PSYCHOTHERAPISTS?


Introduction: International scientific literature about sexual boundary violation (SBV) in Mental Health Care is scarce and mostly focuses on direct sexual contact as such. Societal attention to this topic mostly only occurs very tendentiously and sensational, whereas psychotherapists’ vulnerabilities are hardly ever addressed, although inevitable feelings of attraction toward clients at times arises. Because SBV is still a vaguely defined taboo subject, sound scientific research is only possible after appropriate operationalization of this terminology, and determining valid and reliable methodology for it.

Objectives: Finding appropriate operationalization and methodology for SBV.
Aims: To obtain representative data for scientific research about SBV.
Methods: A literature study was conducted about the operationalization of SBV in research. Interviews were held with stakeholders and psychotherapists. The organisation of Belgium’s Mental Health Care and its recent developments were documented.

Results: The literature study showed that only 3 out of 17 prevalence studies used a broader view on SBV, and that being emotionally unbalanced makes therapists more prone to boundary crossings. This can indicate future boundary violations, which is referred to as the slippery slope.

12 persons of ambulant and residential Mental Health Facilities, and Governmental Health Organizations were interviewed. They all confirmed that a broader view was needed, in order to understand and prevent SBV. Sexual related behaviours and feelings, potentially preceding sexual contact in therapy, should be included in the operationalization.
In Belgium, the term ‘psychotherapist' will be statutory protected in 2016. Governmental accreditation will be given based on educational criteria. Which educational institutions are entitled to give a conceded license is still unknown, but interviews with governmental organisations and psychotherapy-societies give a good estimate. Because the achieved license also determines admission to a society, psychotherapists can be defined based on membership of societies with admission criteria likely analogue to the accreditation criteria.

Conclusions: To do sound scientific research about SBV by psychotherapists 1) sexual related behaviours and feelings, potentially preceding sexual contact in therapy, should be studied, and 2) psychotherapists should be defined and contacted through societies with admission criteria likely analogue to the accreditation criteria.

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